

Sculpting with fire: celebrating ephemerality at AfrikaBurn 2015 in the Tankwa Karoo, South Africa

John Steele

Walter Sisulu University

Department of Visual Art, East London, South Africa

E-mail: jsteele@wsu.ac.za

Land art, and some installation art, is usually aimed at relatively temporarily manipulating the surface of the earth. AfrikaBurn takes place annually in the near-desert of the Tankwa Karoo, South Africa. It is a communal event unique to Africa, and manifests as a fleeting week-long series of interventions in the natural environment, partially aimed at creating and then actively destroying free-standing public sculptures, some of which are huge and intricate. AfrikaBurn gives any one of the thousands of participants an opportunity to be inspired on any scale to generate artworks that take into account a principle that no debris whatsoever is left behind on the surface of the earth after a week-long celebration of creative energies. Unlike, for instance, an artwork built on the edge of the Indian Ocean in the Eastern Cape, where rough tidal seas would ensure gradual destruction, at AfrikaBurn, the sacrificial method of choice is controlled rapid burning, under the direction of a specified firemaster. This paper seeks to unbundle some aspects of land and installation art in Southern Africa with specific reference to AfrikaBurn 2015 events and anti-fracking initiatives. This is within a context that takes into account recognition that even seemingly durable public sculptures are subject to change and may even physically disappear with the passing of time.

Key words: AfrikaBurn; anti-fracking; Burning Man; costuming; ephemeral art; fire art; installation art; land art; mutant vehicles.

Beeldhou met vuur: die viering van kortstondigheid by AfrikaBurn 2015 in die Tankwa Karoo, Suid-Afrika

Landskapkuns, en sommige installasiekuns, se oogmerk is gewoonlik om op relatief tydelike wyse die oppervlak van die aarde te manipuleer. AfrikaBurn vind jaarliks in die semi-woestyngebied van die Tankwa Karoo plaas en manifesteer in 'n weeklange reeks intervensies in die natuurlik omgewing. Hierdie intervensies is gedeeltelik daarop gemik om vrystaande openbare beeldhouwerke – waarvan sommige enorm en ingewikkelde werke - te skep en dan aktief te vernietig. AfrikaBurn gee enige van die duisende deelnemers 'n geleentheid om op enige skaal kunswerke te genereer wat die beginsel dat geen oorblyfsels van enige aard agtergelaat word na 'n weeklange viering van kreatiewe energie in gedagte hou. Anders as, byvoorbeeld, 'n kunswerk wat op die rand van die Indiese Oseaan in die Oos-Kaap gebou word en wat deur ruwe getye vernietig sal word, is die offerandelike metode wat gekies word dié van snelle verbranding onder die beheer van 'n gespesifiseerde brandmeester. Hierdie artikel proeg om sommige van die aspekte van landskap- en installasiekuns in Suidelike Afrika, met spesifieke verwysing na die AfrikaBurn 2015 geleentheid en anti-fracking inisiatiewe, te ontleed. Dit vind plaas binne 'n konteks wat in rekening hou dat skynbaar duursame openbare beeldhouwerke onderworpe is aan verandering en selfs oor tyd fisies mag verdwyn.

Sleutelwoorde: AfrikaBurn, *anti-fracking*, Brandende Man, kostumering, efemeriese kuns, brandkuns, installasies, gemuteerde voertuie.

Central to situatedness of AfrikaBurn (figure 1) is that this annual visual and performing arts event takes place within a lively context of Southern African installation and land art interventions. Strijdom van der Merwe, for example, as in the 2010 work, *am/pm Shadow Lines: Earth Works*, generally uses “natural materials” (Le Clus-Theron 2012: 2) as found on a chosen site. His sculptural forms are shaped “in relation to the landscape ... [and may seek to] make statements about our relationship with the land” (www.strijdom.com/about/, accessed 17th June 2015). Janet Botes, emphasising ephemerality, has made much smaller yet similar 2015 land art statements in such works as *A block of sand*. On the other hand, Willem Boshoff’s 2006 installation, *Garden of Words III*, consisted of “15,000 handmade fabric flowers printed with text ... commemorating local biodiversity ... [a] monument to plants nearing extinction” (Dapena-

Tretter 2014: 62). Alternatively, the 2013 installation, *Homing*, by Jenna Burchill, is a high-tech “meticulously hand-built interactive environment [located inside a building] designed to be an accessible and exciting meeting of contemporary art, sounds and live interactive participation” (<http://www.art.co.za/jennaburchell/homing>, accessed 3rd August 2015).



Figure 1
The 2015 *AfrikaBurn Ticket* by Sandy Mclea (Photo of ticket: John Steele, 2015).

The settings that these artists and AfrikaBurn participants create are parts of themselves, in the sense suggested by Tim Ingold (1993: 156): our “landscapes” of spaces, objects and thoughts within and about “the world as it is known to those who dwell therein” are intimately experienced rather than viewed from a so-called detached distance. Since 2007, the annual AfrikaBurn event has provided space and opportunity for a huge, interactive, land art experience focused extensively on fire and burning rituals. Indeed, fire gives energy, light and warmth, and is widely associated with purity and purification, as well as with rebirth and renewal (Gilmore 2010, Hockett 2004). Rituals associated with fire appear to have been performed throughout recorded time (Bell 1997), evidence of one such early event being the Paleolithic era ceramic female figurine *Dolni Větonice*, created around 24 000 BC (Budja 2006, Steele 2012, Verpoorte 2001). AfrikaBurn adds to this heritage.

AfrikaBurn takes place within the austere sculpted and achingly beautiful Tankwa Karoo semi-desert, at the privately owned Stonehenge Farm, situated on the R355 in an ancient plain with the Cedarburg to the west and Tankwa Karoo National Park to the east. This dusty and sharp shale-strewn site in an isolated part of the Northern Cape is briefly transformed during mid-autumn as people come together for about a week to create an intentional transient community based on giving, as well as installation and other forms of visual art, such as theme camps, mutant vehicles, individual and group performance, costume, music from every direction and camaraderie of shared enjoyment under difficult conditions in a relatively pristine natural environment. Close to 10,000 people gathered at AfrikaBurn 2015 and, then a month later, there was hardly a trace of human presence on the physical landscape.

Anchored standpoints

Situatedness of AfrikaBurn also includes that it is part of an international community sharing an interest in visual arts and spontaneous entertainment arising out of the Burning Man event held annually for a week on a “prehistoric lake bed ... a huge expanse of perfectly flat land with

a very distinctive surface of cracked alkali ... ringed by mountains” (Kristen 2003: 343) in the Nevada Desert, United States of America. This temporary Black Rock City site, established in 1991 (Ramey 2010: 35) – like Tankwa Town in the Karoo, among other regional Burn sites – becomes a fleeting place of residence for thousands of creative people who converge to generate “site and time specific installations and performances” (Kristen 2003: 343). On the flyleaf of the indispensable AfrikaBurn 2015 Survival Guide (afrikaburn.com/the-event/preparation/survival-guide, accessed 4th July 2015), organisers and participants are all centrally placed as both actors and audience. In response to the question, “What is AfrikaBurn?” it is clearly stated that “you are. You build the camps, the art and the mutant vehicles. You’re the performer – and the audience. There is no them.” Fortunati (2006: 152, 159 citing Foucault 1986) suggests that this attitude encourages “a pluralistic, self-expressive heterotopia” of the sort envisioned by Foucault, whereby this AfrikaBurn space, for example, becomes an “effectively enacted utopia in which ... all other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted”.

Guiding principles, initially established by Larry Harvey in the USA (Gilmore 2010: 38), are crucial to the context within which this heterotopia and other worldwide Burns are conducted and experienced. They set the tone and provide a frame of reference for organisers and participants, and are listed at the outset of the AfrikaBurn 2015 Survival Guide (afrikaburn.com/the-event/preparation/survival-guide/guiding-principles, accessed 4th July 2015). Foremost of these is that of “communal effort”, which stresses “creative cooperation and collaboration” and encourages everyone to become part of a “radically participatory ethic” because “we believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can only occur through the medium of deeply personal participation”. “Civic responsibility” is also important so that everyone assumes accountability for “public welfare”. Furthermore, “immediacy” is encouraged as a means towards “overcoming barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with [our] natural world”. It is also stressed that “radical inclusion ... self-reliance ... [and] self-expression” are three cornerstones emphasising that “no prerequisites exist for participation ... reliance on inner resources ... [and self-expression are conceptualised as a] gift to others”.

Another anchored standpoint (afrikaburn.com/the-event/preparation/survival-guide/guiding-principles, accessed 4th July 2015) is respect for the natural environment, evidenced by “leaving no physical trace of our activities”. Other core principles hinge on “decommodification” and “gifting”, which are in direct contrast with, for example, the overtly entrepreneurial emphasis of the South African National Arts Festival that takes place for 12 days in Grahamstown every winter. This festival, which hosts a huge conglomeration of visual and performing arts, is said to “annually contribute R350-million to the provincial economy, and ... Grahamstown earns R90-million” (Loewe 2015: 3). Some exhibitions and shows generate substantial income and/or recognition for artists, performers and others associated with this industry. AfrikaBurn, on the other hand, is a not-for-profit company that, according to founder member and artworks coordinator Monique Scheiss, “plows back into subsidising community development projects as well as upcoming artists and promising artworks” (media interview of 1st May 2015). Furthermore, at Tankwa Town, product and self-promotion is discouraged because “our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, advertising” or personal fame. Moreover, the only product for sale during the event is ice, for only a few hours per day. Decommodification is underpinned by an emphasis on “gifting”, which should be unconditional: “Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value”. Finally, the eleventh principle (afrikaburn.com/the-event/preparation/survival-

guide/guiding principles, accessed 4th July 2015), added by the Afrikaburn directorate, is “each one teach one” because “when the opportunity presents itself, we pass knowledge on”.

Setting

Tankwa Town, which occupies about 1.4 square kilometres (Travis Lyle email of 6th July 2015), is thus not a neutral setting: it becomes a temporary space for enactment of emplaced consciousness that encourages self-reliance, sharing and creative expression on any scale, all within a context that is largely geared for “playing with fire” (Black 2007: 339, Kristen 2007: 333) by thousands of people for whom experiencing the heat, sculptural intrigue and transformative capabilities of this medium are high on the agenda.

Physical infrastructure “satisfying two basic human needs – bodily health and finding one’s way” (Rohrmeier & Starrs 2014: 160) is laid out annually from scratch. According to Travis Lyle, Head of AfrikaBurn Communications (email of 7th July 2015), the event takes place under the auspices of five full-time AfrikaBurn employees and 75 core officials and with the help of approximately 1,400 volunteers. In 2015, there were 15 medical crew on site, as were around 220 public “rangers” who are “non-confrontational community mediators, and are there to promote awareness of potential hazards, ranging from sunburn to tent fires, and lots of other stuff in between” (afrikaburn.com/?s=rangers, accessed on 5th July 2015). AfrikaBurn Department of Public Works and volunteers also checked and cleared approximately 10 square kilometres surrounding the site for any litter and other matter out of place in order to leave as little human trace as possible once everyone had departed.

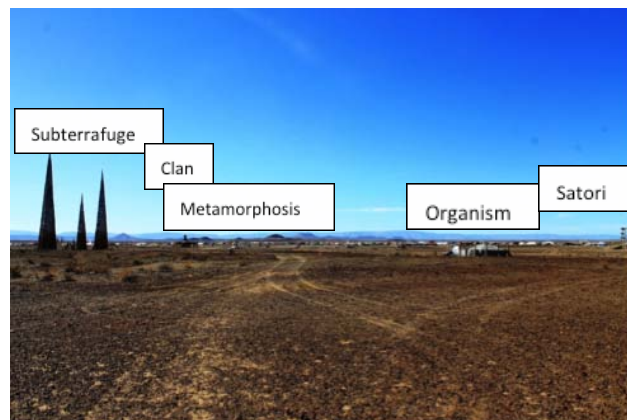
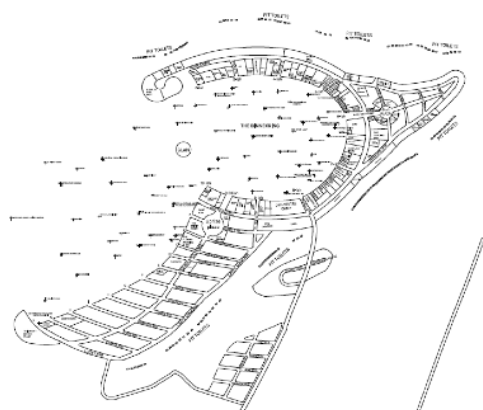


Figure 2

AfrikaBurn Town Plan 2015, left, with specific positions allocated for installation artworks, right, in the centre space around the Binnekring (Plan: (<http://afrikaburn.com/the-event/tankwa-town>, accessed 22 August 2015). Photo: John Steele, 2015).

The town plan (figure 2) incorporates operational, as well as health and safety headquarters, more than 90 registered theme camps, and carefully ordered camping spaces focused around an extended and expandable public common space, which featured more than 60 registered installation artworks. Of these, 18 were burned, always under the careful auspices of firemaster Martin Glinister. This entire setting is also a playground for various mutant vehicles and mobile music units, which roam about day and night, entertaining, ferrying and drawing crowds to artworks, events and spaces.

VuvuLounge, Satori and Organism

The *VuvuLounge 2.0* (figure 3a), for example, made an original appearance in 2007, then in revamped form in 2010 and again in 2011. The 2015 2.0 model, with a 1,000-watt sound system, was developed by Richard Bowsher and Sebastian Prinz, and various other “Vuvus & The Roses”. It featured an elaborate DJ booth, three everlasting flame burner ports and two large flame throwers shaped like flowers, as well as a trailer lounge-like place for anyone to use as an occasional space for moments of relaxation and resting of weary feet. Once assembled, it was moved mainly between two specific installations, at no more than 10 kilometres an hour, and as per regulations, always accompanied by walkers/conductors while in motion (<https://sites.google.com/a/afrikaburn.com/dmv-mutant-vehicles/home/141219e>, accessed 5th July 2015). It was most frequently to be found nestled close to the installation, *Satori* (figure 3b), conceptualised by Daniel Popper with help from a large team, who all worked ceaselessly on raising the structure and associated electronica up until the moment of the inaugural performance at approximately 10.30pm on Thursday, 30th May. This opening featured a live show by Markus Wormstorm, and spectacular video mapped lighting created by Wayne Ellis and Jannes Hendrikz. The lighting moved with the music, bringing usually abstract visuals to life in such a way as to express conceptualisations of feeling free upon “seeing into one’s true nature” (AfrikaBurn WTF? Guide 2015: 25). Thereafter, *Satori* became a highly favored DJ venue for pulsing electronic music. Its raised dance floor was also a good lookout spot from which to observe other installations and events.



Figure 3a, above.
VuvuLounge 2.0 (Photo: John Steele).



Figure 3b, right.
Satori (Photo: John Steele).

One such installation was *Organism* (figure 4). Situated through a dip towards the west, it had taken eight days of intensive hard labour to erect prior to my arrival at commencement of festivities. Conceived by painter Anthea Delmotte (<https://www.facebook.com/CroakMusic>, entry for May 14th 2015, accessed on 6th July 2015), this collaborative “Croak and the Pythian Painter” self-built performance space was an “interactive, transitional, multiform artwork” that grew every day. She explained in an email (of 21st September 2015) that, with help from Byron Ramsey, Jurgen van Schalkwyk and Stuart Woods, the collective intent was to create an

installation that was “alive with living energy, emotions, and experience”. Performances “mixed all the elements that have been used to bring on trance since the earliest of times ... visual arts, music and dance ... depicting order that forms out of universal chaos and ... the cycle of creation, living, experience, up to death” (AfrikaBurn WTF? Guide 2015: 25). Anthea Delmotte and vocalist on keyboards, Martinique Matinino du Toit of alternative band Croak, took centre stage every evening once the sun was four[ish] fingers above the horizon. Matinino du Toit (email of 16th June 2015) has described her AfrikaBurn 2015 experience as being “extraordinary ... there is nothing like performing in front of not only a vast and open minded audience, but also performing to the great nothing of the desert ... it was a truly calming experience”.



Figure 4

Anthea Delmotte, as “Pythian Painter” performing *Organism*, and then torching the installation, right (Photos: John Steele, left, and Hennie Niemand, right).

These were mesmerising performances. Vocals soared and oozed, sometimes purely as an instrument without verbal content, underpinned by solid keyboards, guitar by Mike Deall and percussion by Julian Brookstone, to which Delmotte danced and painted, sometimes paused, swayed and painted some more ... and on and on, evening after evening. Slowly, images emerged and became subsumed as others became resolved amid swirling dervish-like dances that were also interspersed with sensually slow and gentle moments. Delmotte, who is known for finely rendered realistic portraiture and landscapes (SA Art Times 2013: 36-38; Anthea Delmotte Facebook), used her full hands and other parts of her body interchangeably with rollers and brushes to create extraordinary expressive imagery on successive evenings on a huge 2.5 metre by 21 metre canvas (email of 23rd August 2015) spanning the six metre-high installation. Delmotte (email of 14th July 2015) has said of this experience that “a flow takes over while working with this combination of visuals, sound and movement ... there is a charge/current of sorts that energises ... a bigger energy than just my own ... this way of working is experimental and free ... I love it. It’s who I am.”

Then suddenly, one evening brought on the exquisite moments of death and rebirth that we – main performers and audiences as participant spectators – had all been aiming at: to accompanying soulful wailing and musical declamations from Croak, under the watchful guidance of Glinister, Delmotte torched *Organism*, which soon burned furiously, sacrificially sending the structure, painting and messages written all over it into burning particles flying far and wide, images of which have been seared into collective memories. She has described those moments (email of 7th July 2015) of lighting the installation as “the highlight for sure. I could

feel my energy increasing to beyond limits ... my body was in overdrive ... magic to light it ... magic to experience it burn ... perfect vision ... [and] release”.

Such ephemerality, whereby “works are created with the intention of them having a finite life”, embraces instability and “evinces change by forcing us to confront what once was and to imagine what lies ahead” (Purpura 2009: 11, 14). During the week in which the final phases of *Organism* was being created, and then radically deconstructed, events and mini performances were taking place throughout Tankwa Town. I was on one occasion particularly intrigued by a huge praying *Mantis* that paraded between the installations, and only later discovered that it was a performance piece created out of tissue and cane by members of the local Elandsvlei Community under the auspices of AfrikaBurn Outreach. The *Mantis* was not burned, and there are plans afoot to add to it for future performances (<http://afrikaburn.com/community/afrikaburn-year-round/outreach>, accessed 6th July 2015). The *Flamin’ Amazing Show*, another series of artworks and performances arising out of community development initiatives in the greater Cape Town area, featured large puppets, samba goema music and a fire and circus performance that told an “archetypal story of good versus evil” (<http://afrikaburn.com/community/afrikaburn-year-round/dac-funded-projects/flamin>, accessed on 18th July 2015). Both the *Mantis* and the *Flamin’ Amazing Show* were enthralling, and they “provided skills development and job opportunities for marginalised and emerging artists” and foundations upon which future community-based initiatives can be grown and brought to AfrikaBurn (<http://afrikaburn.com/community/afrikaburn-year-round/dac-funded-projects>, accessed 22nd August 2015).

Metamorphosis and Spirit Train

Another artwork to include a community development component was *Metamorphosis* (figure 5), created under the auspices of Verity Maud, who has been involved with AfrikaBurn since inception, and a team of helpers. Their website (<https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/metamorphosis-a-temple-for-afrikaburn-2015#/story>, accessed on 6th July 2015) explains that four people from Thusong Youth Centre in Alexandra Township in Johannesburg were “upskilled” in carpentry and metalworking during initial cutting and pre-assembly phases, and then accompanied this structure into the desert for erection at AfrikaBurn. Burning Man – and regional Burns, such as AfrikaBurn – attach great significance to the presence of temple spaces, which are usually ritually burned (Gilmore 2010: 87, Haden-Guest 2006: 114, Johnson 2012: 21, Kristen 2003: 345; 2007: 334, Ramey 2010: 44, Rohrmeier & Starrs 2014: 162). *Metamorphosis* was just such a temple space, “where people can go to reflect, pray, contemplate, remember lost loved ones, just be spiritual” (Steenkamp blog: <http://www.flowsa.com/blog/entry/metamorphosis-afrikaburn-2015-a-life-changing-adventure-for-two-flowstars/>, accessed on 25th July 2015). This installation stands “eight meters high, and spans 20 meters in diameter. In numerology, eight signifies both building, and destruction ... [while] the wings symbolise freedom, flight” and change ([https://www .indiegogo.com/projects/metamorphosis-a-temple-for-afrikaburn-2015#/story](https://www.indiegogo.com/projects/metamorphosis-a-temple-for-afrikaburn-2015#/story), accessed 25th July 2015).

I came across *Metamorphosis* for the first time at night, after having spent the previous two days travelling and then setting up camp. The eight butterfly wings were supported by four entrances upon which symbols of the elements air, water, fire and wind had been carved. These entrances faced the cardinal points, and the entire structure was topped by a metal flower of life. After some time I noticed that many messages had already been written on the structure by anyone who cared to do so. During the following days, people came and went, adding messages and “using the Temple as needed” (AfrikaBurn WTF? Guide 2015: 23). Unlike for *Organism*

and many other installations that relied extensively on sound as an integral part of a burn, word was circulated that *Metamorphosis* would be a silent burn. Then, on Saturday night, restless mutant vehicles, mobile music units and theme camps gradually quietened as thousands of people gathered around the perimeter for this burn. Eventually, an unsteady silence settled on Tankwa Town, and base fires around *Metamorphosis* were lit and flames grew and licked the structure, crackling and sputtering until peaking before slow collapse and eventual burnout.



Figure 5

Metamorphosis, far left, in perspective with *Subterrafuge*, centre, and *The Clan 2015*, right; and the *Metamorphosis* burn (Photos: Jonx Pillemer, left, and John Steele, right).

This burn was hugely cathartic, and one could almost feel a collective heaving as memories and wishes dissolved in sacrificial flames ... a literal metamorphosis was experienced by many. Yet it was one of many burns, each of which “has many meanings to the community, probably as many as there are participants ... [and is seen by some to] symbolise destruction of the past and clearing of space for the future” (Kristen 2007: 334).

Crowds gradually dissolved as *Metamorphosis* became transformed into coals and then ashes. Lights and music gradually revived, pulling people here and there, towards any of thousands of other attractions, in all directions. One such attractant, intermittently belching flames from several orifices, was the 35 metre-long *Spirit Train* (figure 6) mobile “steam punk mutant vehicle” (AfrikaBurn WTF? Guide 2015: 16) music rig. Brainchild of Michael Kennedy, But Corpaci and several others, the *Spirit Train*, created in Cape Town and assembled at AfrikaBurn 2015 for the first time, is a five-carriage train on wheels, built from scratch, pulled by a mutant tractor dressed, thanks to some extraordinarily creative metalwork by Chyma, as a wolf called Lobo. The DJ booth, literally the heart of the train, featuring top-notch music and other controls, including for laser lighting and flame throwers, enabled so-inclined people to dance the days and nights away to seemingly endless tunes and visual effects played by the likes of Iain Dallas, Be Svendson, Jumbo Jones, Kanan K7 and others on the “chunky sound system” (AfrikaBurn WTF? Guide 2015: 16).

The *Spirit Train* often formed its semicircle of carriages close to the much smaller work *Nothing*, as well as to the *Love life and everything else* installation by Rooibaard, each strand of this tree “representing the flow of life” (AfrikaBurn WTF? Guide 2015: 22). This work also featured various soundtracks and oddments of speeches mysteriously playing from within it, which contributed to attracting a steady stream of people, many of whom were on their way to or from the more centrally placed 24 metre-diameter and 12 metre-high (Honey email of 6th July 2015) *Clan 2015* installation.



Figure 6

Spirit Train (Photos: Left, John Steele, right, <https://www.facebook.com/thespirittrain/photos>).

The Clan 2015 and Subterrafuge

Since inception, in Burning Man tradition (Johnson 2012: 20), AfrikaBurn has always featured an installation specifically designed as a central meeting point, with an effigy of the AfrikaBurn logo prominently placed on top. As Monique Schiess explained (media briefing of 1st May 2015), the logo is derived from a San rock art petroglyph and is intended to convey a “sense of rootedly local South Africaness, community and unity of intent”. Main designer and creator of *Clan 2015* (figure 7a), Nathan Victor Honey, said at this media briefing that the *Clan 2015* installation, like *Metamorphosis*, was intended as a focal point in the landscape, an inviting space that would attract gatherings and engender feelings of community. Honey explained that the actual design process took place with inputs from partner Isa Marques and many other sources. He added that it was decided from the start that local community members would be involved in and benefit from skills transfer and thereafter have access to tools used for the build. Thus, the basic framework and preparatory build of *Clan 2015* took place in the village square of nearby Sutherland, under the main auspices of Honey and Isa Marques. The skeletal structure was then dismantled and trucked to Tankwa Town, and resurrected over three weeks in readiness for the AfrikaBurn 2015 event.



Figure 7a

The Clan 2015 as seen from *Spirit Train* (Photo: Christiaan Barnard).



Figure 7b

Subterrafuge, on its last evening before being torched (Photo: John Steele).

Honey, with others, was also central to the conceptualisation and build of *Subterrafuge* (figure 7b) in 2014. Seeing this installation in the distance was my first inkling that I was close to arrival at Tankwa Town on Sunday, 26th April. It had been fully constructed on site in 2014 and was due to have been burned in that year, but prevailing winds had made it too dangerous to do so, and now, in 2015, it still stood with iconic towers powerfully dominating the landscape in all directions. It was built “as an attempt to raise awareness and resistance, not only to the fracking of the Karoo, but to all selfish profit-driven destruction of the last few areas of natural wonder still left on the planet ... and it is hoped that this message will remain” (AfrikaBurn WTF? Guide 2015: 19) even after the structure has been burned. Honey explained (media briefing of 1st May 2015) that the title of the work referred to the anti-fracking theme in the sense that “sub” refers to “under or below”; “terra” refers to “land”; “fuge” refers to “expelling something”; and “subterfuge” refers to “deceit used to achieve a goal”. He also pointed out that the sharp points at the tips of *Subterrafuge* hint at potential for violent intrusions, such as those proposed by frackers and other exploitative commercial enterprises. Furthermore, Honey positioned the six conical towers, ranging in height from eight to 30 metres, in such a way that one or more of them is usually obscured from view by others; this ambiguity refers to lies and misrepresentations that frackers and other exploiters perpetrate.

Honey has explained (media briefing of 1st May 2015) that both *Subterrafuge* and *Clan 2015*, each using about 20 tons of wood, were designed and built with fire in mind (figures 8a and b). Wood and combustibles were sculpted so as to deliberately shape fire. He thus sculpted these works, aiming for fruition of shape, form and concept, to occur at peak instants of physical destruction, when the fire would be at its fullest power and sculpted glory, at the very moment when the wooden structures themselves were being totally consumed by fire. Such large-scale fire art is unprecedented in South Africa, and ceremonial burning is powerfully transformative when connected, as at AfrikaBurn, to rituals “representing cleansing, purification, and release” (Kristen 2007: 333).



Figure 8a
Burning of *The Clan 2015* (Photo: Zac Cirivello).



Figure 8b
Burning of *Subterrafuge*
(Photo: Jonx Pillemer).

Ritual is central to all burns, be they large or small. In the case of *Clan 2015*, messages and tokens had been placed all over it during the days preceding the evening of Friday, 1st May. On the evening of the burn, people were drawn to *Clan 2015* by mutant vehicles and roaming sound systems. Performance of *Dance of a thousand flames* by fire dancers of the Flow Arts

Commune and others further set the scene for a spectacular and enthralling burn. Accompanied by muted yet still throbbing electronic music and whoops and cheers, as well as some tears, the centrally placed AfrikaBurn logo stood tall seemingly for ages and then slowly also collapsed and became subsumed by flames. The heat of this sculpture in flames was extraordinary, and dust devils periodically rose and swoopingly swirled across the surrounding space, and as the fire diminished, so people surged forward, again and again, and others departed for alternative entertainments.

The *Clan 2015* fire was still hot when word spread that, indeed, *Subterrafuge* would also be burned that night. *VuvuLounge*, among other roaming sound systems, drew people to the site and, in due course, it was torched without using any artificial accelerants. These spires sent flames high into the air, then slowly collapsed in on themselves, creating an enormous bonfire around which people drew ever closer. Participants were wonderstruck. Many danced; others performed in different ways, enjoying the pure heat, energy and cathartic release of that monumental burn. The landscape had, again, been irrevocably changed. Honey now also has the dubious accolade of having burnt 40 tons of wood fuel in one night!

These two burns, so soon after each other, generated a “potent collective effervescence” (Chen 2012: 320), which was expressed throughout the night as participants moved among digitally based light installations, musical events and theme camps. On the following evening, it would be the turn of the longest land-based artwork, the 12 metre-high by 120 metre-long *Love the way you lie*, to be burned.

Roelien Brink’s *Love the way you lie*

Created by Roelien Brink, this work’s poignant wording “JUST GONNA STAND THERE AND WATCH ME BURN?” (figure 9) had been hovering on the western skyline, and was lit up at night like the Hollywood sign. Brink told me (interview of 30th April 2015) that this installation was conceived at a time of emotional turmoil and pain arising from her separation from the father of their three-year-old child. She relates that at that point, she was in a “very dark, sad and lonely place ... the emotion I felt after this loss was almost unbearable” (<http://thisisroeyourboat.blogspot.com/>, accessed on 31st July 2015). Construction of the artwork, using approximately 180 discarded wooden pallets, of different shapes and sizes, knocked down and then reconstructed into the 34 characters needed, took three months of solid work with dedicated assistance from a core team of six helpers. Transporting all of this from Cape Town was fraught with challenges. Setting up the work at Afrikaburn took three days of erecting support structures, then the letters, then lights and a generator for nighttime illumination.

The words “JUST GONNA STAND THERE AND WATCH ME BURN?” had formed a backdrop on the far skyline all week, acting as a magnet for passers-by, and encouraged people to think about their own actions and ways in which this very concept had played out/was playing out in their own lives. Created to express heartache and intended to generate multiple meanings, Brink has described her own feelings on the occasion when the lights were switched on for the first time as being a “struggle to fight back tears ... it was so beautiful and at the same time so awful ... I felt like it was glowing at me, as if the question was burning at me ... Getting angry and impatient with me struggling to find the answers” (<http://thisisroeyourboat.blogspot.com/>, accessed on 31st July 2015).



Figure 9
Roelien Brink, left, and *Love the way you lie* (Photos: John Steele).

Eventually, the time arrived and the installation was primed and then torched. When reflecting on the burning of *Love the way you lie*, Brink seems to have aptly expressed a range of feelings and sense of catharsis experienced by many at AfrikaBurn 2015:

“I will never forget the warmth of the blazing flames against my face as it burnt ... it reminded me of the warmth my team mates made me feel. It echoed the warmth from people at the festival I did not know. People who came up to me to tell me their stories, based on the meaning the artwork inspired them to feel ... I have faith in humanity again. I have faith in love again” (<http://thisisroeyourboat.blogspot.com/>, accessed on 31st July 2015).

Conclusion

Finally, it is appropriate to reflect on Brink’s experience of creating visual art and then feeling regeneration through primal sacrifice by fire and interconnectedness with other people. Her experience of regaining faith in a capacity to love and be loved again, however fleetingly, is part of what Bert Olivier (2002: 242, citing also Olivier 1987) calls the “power of art ... [wherein *Love the way you lie* specifically, and AfrikaBurn in general, has an enabling energy] to transform the everyday, as well as people”. According to Olivier (2002: 247, citing Gadamer 1977, 1982), all participants at, for example, Tankwa Town, are, as intended by AfrikaBurn organisers, “co-constitutive of the ‘play’ of art”. He thus also suggests that “interplay among” all installations, theme camps, performances, burns, costuming, roving mutant vehicles and music events invite reflection by participants on “own relations to important issues raised in the process, and consequently to reorient themselves in the world by means of a transformed praxis” (Olivier 2002: 255).

AfrikaBurn as a whole is a hugely playful land art intervention in the sense that land art can be both additive and/or subtractive “modifications to the surface of the earth” (Swenson 2012: 149), plus whatever visual and aural electronica and performance may occur therein and on. Tankwa Town is incrementally created and then purposefully dissolved in a series of spectacular communal events, which include individual responsibilities for final clearing of the site to as pristine a condition as possible, and departure therefrom. AfrikaBurn then marks transcendence by finding another life digitally on websites and in social media, as well as in personal memories ... until the next burn, scheduled for 25th April to 1st May 2016.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks are extended to Janette Bennett and Laila Steele for good suggestions and help with editing. The financial assistance of Walter Sisulu University is acknowledged. All views expressed and any errors are my own.

Works cited

- AfrikaBurn, 2015. *WTF? Guide*. Booklet handed out at the entry gate.
- Bell, C. 1997. *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Black, T. 2007. The voice of fire. *Leonardo* 40(4): 339.
- Budja, M. 2006. The transition to farming and the ceramic trajectories in Western Eurasia: from ceramic figurines to vessels. *Documenta Praehistorica* 33: 183-201.
- Chen, K. K. 2012. Charismatizing the routine: storytelling for meaning and agency in the Burning Man organization. *Qualitative Sociology* 35(3): 311-334.
- Dapena-Tretter, A. 2014. Willem Boshoff's visual lists: a personal plea for cultural preservation. *African Arts* 47(3): 58-65.
- Fortunati, A. 2005. Utopia, social sculpture, and Burning Man, in *AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man* edited by L Gilmore & M van Proyen. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Foucault, M. & Miskowiec, J. 1986. Of other spaces. *Diacritics* 16(1): 22-27.
- Gadamer, H-G. 1977. Heidegger's later philosophy, in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Tr. Linge, D.E. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 213-228.
- Gadamer, H-G. 1982. *Truth and Method*. Tr. Ed. Barden, G. & Cumming, J. New York: Crossroad.
- Gilmore, L. 2010. *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Haden-Guest, A. 2006. Report from Black Rock City: in defense of Burning Man. *Art in America* 94(6): 112-117.
- Hockett, J. 2004. Reckoning ritual and counterculture in the Burning Man community: communication, ethnography and the self in reflexive Modernism. Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, United States of America.
- Ingold, T. 1993. The temporality of the landscape. *World Archaeology* 25(2): 152-174.
- Johnson, F. 2012. Burning Man, desire, and the culture of Empire. *Tikkun Magazine* 27(3): 20-63.
- Kristen, C. 2003. The outsider art of Burning Man. *Leonardo* 36(5): 343-348.
- Kristen, C. 2007. Playing with fire. *Leonardo* 40(4): 332-337.
- Le Clus-Theron, J. 2012. Seemingly 'impossible' art forms: Strijdom van der Merwe's land art in the context of the South African art market. *Literator* 33(1): 1-10.
- Loewe, M. 2015. Fest kick-off. *Daily Dispatch* (3rd July): East London.

- Olivier, B. 1987. Art and transformation. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 6(1): 16-23.
- Olivier, B. 2002. Gadamer, Heidegger, play, art and the appropriation of tradition. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 21(4): 242-257.
- Purpura, A. 2009. Framing the ephemeral. *African Arts* Autumn: 11-15.
- Ramey, H. L. 2010. Framing metropolis: performing theatre of affect at the Burning Man Project, 2010. *TheatreForum* 38: 35-46.
- Rohrmeier, K. & Starrs, P. F. 2014. The paradoxical Black Rock City: all cities are mad. *Geographical Review* 104(2): 153-173.
- SA Art Times. 2013. Anthea Delmotte's 'Portals of Creation'. March: 36-38 [unspecified author].
- Steele, J. 2012. Prehistoric Southern African ceramic figurines from Kulubele further contextualised – some links and discontinuities. *South African Journal of Art History* 27(2): 62-78.
- Swenson, K. 2012. Land art for the media age. *Art in America* October: 146-157.
- Verpoorte, A. 2001. *Places of Art, Traces of Fire*. Leiden: University of Leiden.

John Steele first worked with clay as a studio potter in Rhodes village in the Witteberge Mountains of the Eastern Cape in the 1970s, and then as a pottery manager in Mthatha, prior to taking up his present post as Senior Lecturer in the Visual Art Department at Walter Sisulu University in East London, South Africa.