

Burning the Karoo



For one week each year, a temporary village blossoms in the desert of the Tankwa Karoo, four hours' drive north-east of Cape Town. To some, it's home to an orgy of self-expression, psychedelics, and dancing. Beneath it lies an ethos that's about finding new ways to solve old societal problems. At a time when we have to share an over-stretched, tightly-packed planet, learning to play nicely together has never been more urgent. **Curly the 'Burner** went on an epic trip in search of fiery effigies, protest art, and the spirit of AfrikaBurn.

Photographs by **Michael Groenewald**.

CONTENTS

This is an edited version of a story first published by Leonie Joubert under a *nom de plume* in 2015 as part of an 'Earth Ecologies' course for the University of Cape Town's Environmental Humanities of the South. For legal and rights' reasons, she has to let the cat out the bag on the authorship question in this version of the publication.

Rondebosch, Cape Town, South Africa.

The opinions expressed in this book are the author's, and do not reflect those of the University of Cape Town.

www.leoniejoubert.co.za

© Leonie Joubert (text) & Michael Groenewald (photographs), 2018.

All rights reserved. The author agrees that this book may be distributed and republished freely, on condition that she and the photographer are acknowledged, and that it is for non-profit purposes. Share the love, don't exploit it.

For privacy reasons, the names of many of the people in this story have been changed or withheld, either partly or in full.

CHAPTER 1 | The End

CHAPTER 2 | Blank Canvas

CHAPTER 3 | Sharing Spaces

CHAPTER 4 | The Beginning

CHAPTER 1: THE END



1 THE END

It's late, nudging up to midnight, probably. But out here, there are no watches. There's only time, which is always sort of now-ish. A bulging orb, a shaving or two from budding into full moon, tracks a silvery arc across the vaulted darkness above.

Tonight, the moon is the spotlight on a stage where a rare piece of theatre is about to play out. Its reflected rays light up conical wooden spikes that rear up out of the gravelly desert floor, towering over the audience by what feels like orders of magnitude.

The crowd is effervescent as the night edges towards its zenith. The bass beats of a dozen distant music rigs collide in this unlikely theatre space, amping up the messy excitement. Human shapes press against the temporary perimeter - a 360-degree stage front - drawn in the dirt to keep the audience back from the approaching inferno. Some sit cross legged in the dust, others lounge in a partner's lap. Further back, the standing crowd jostles like restless colts for a vantage, and then settles. For many, this is the prequel to just another bonfire as the remote desert festival crescendoes. For others, it's a moment they've been waiting for for a year.

The largest of the towers, a 10 storey colossus, stands silently over the other loosely-arranged five, but it's hard to count exactly how many there are in this shadowy nether-time.

Fire is not their destruction, explains artist and creator Nathan Honey. Fire is their completion. One of his giant artworks has already gone through its final metamorphosis tonight: a cathedral-like dome with AfrikaBurn's multi-limbed 'clan' effigy striding though the sky above it, was engulfed by flames shortly after sunset. Its ashes are glowing down to papery nothing a few hundred meters from here.

These towers have been waiting for their last moments for a year now, and finally it begins. A mushroom cloud of flame and hellish black smoke explodes and billows up between the towers, sent up by a modified air vortex cannon, and the crowd melts into an ecstasy of whoops and cheers. Inside the fire perimeter, a handful of figures are thrown into silhouette by the flaming torches they carry. Their beetle-like size giving scale to these monstrous cones.

One of their torches reaches down to kiss the foot of the southern-most tower. Within seconds, the flames grip the desert-baked wood. The inside of the tower glows yellow through its cross-hatched cladding as the *gannabos* inside it ignites.

Later, Honey will explain why this moment was a triumph: the fire was started without any accelerants. You can't build an artwork in the

Karoo that's opposed to the fossil fuel industry, and use diesel to set it alight.

Within seconds, the flames claw their way up the inside of the tower and the entire thing shimmers with ravenous heat. The torch bearers take their unlikely artistic medium to the feet of the other towers. Soon, each spike is vibrating with hungry flames which lunge out the sides, bent over by a north-westerly wind.

The sudden heat sends a Dervish of mini-twisters whirling out from the singing infernos, sucking up spirals of air, and dust, and ash as they twirl over the desert floor. They spin, gyrate, dissolve into nothing.

The towers roar. Some of the audience shrink back as the smouldering air smacks them in the face.

Stage left, the first tower leans a fraction, as if resting a weary hip. Then, with an improbable slowness, the full might of the thing arcs sideways and slams itself into the ground in an explosion of flame and sparks.

The audience erupts.

Moments later, a second cone succumbs, buckling at the knees. Then another gives way, transforming into a shower of sparks. And another goes. Finally, the largest, the 10 storey behemoth, gives way at the waist, toppling sideways.



All that remains of the several tons of wooden ribs and cladding that made up this soaring sculpture is the flaming trunk of the biggest tower and the fading hoots of a satiated crowd.

One year ago, this artwork was supposed to burn. But for one year it kept standing. In that time it became the emblem of a fringe group of activists trying to push back against the predatory exploits of the fossil fuel industry. That one year was time for it to parch to tinder dryness in the desert sun.

Now, finally, the last strokes of the artwork that was Subterrafuge are drawn into the night sky in a volley of heat and flames and cheering exultation on the penultimate night of this offbeat gathering in May 2015.



For a year, this majestic, subversive structure stood in its wilderness gallery, on a private farm close to the Tankwa Karoo National Park in one of the remotest parts of the Northern Cape, about four hours' drive north-east of Cape Town, South Africa.

Few ever saw it, and many of those who did, didn't know what it stood for. For a year, it stood here silently, but it was never voiceless.

Now, the coals pulse as they shed their heat. The fire 'rangers' drop the perimeter and allow the most eager in the audience to press in closer. Some shed their clothes to dance, radiant-skinned in the glow. The rest of the crowd drifts off into the night, drawn away by the thumping embrace of the many dance floors that hammer out their tunes from various points on the festival's compass.

Just like that, Subterrufuge is no more.



Veteran 'Burner Nathan Honey is looking for a lighter. Like the rest of Tankwa Town - the nickname given to this temporary tented village that materialises out of nowhere for one week every autumn - he looks a little morning-after-the-night-before. His eyes are shot through with filaments of red. His hair is bristly and a bit matted, and hasn't seen a brush in days - personal grooming isn't high on anyone's agenda, out here in the desert.

The rawness of the moment is softened by a sun that hoists itself lazily over the mountains far off in the east, spilling an orange glow

over his sun-toughened hide as he surveys the few souls ambling across the *Binnekring*.

The *Binnekring* is the gallery space for AfrikaBurn: an egg-shaped natural pan of gravelly desert that's reserved for art pieces, some of which are torched each year. It's where costumed 'Burners stroll and dance and play. It's where the 'mutant vehicles' - the decorated art cars - cruise endlessly, ferrying people back and forth. It's the epicentre of the twin horns of the 'suburbs' of Tankwa Town, the tented village that's been described as a temporary Las Vegas (gaudy neon lights, flashing strobes, ear-splitting dance floors, plenty of revelry), and as a refugee camp (no natural shelter, no running water, no electricity, pit toilets, no refuse removal).

A few of last night's party stragglers cross paths with the early risers, one group heading for bed, another heading out to play.

Honey is perched on The Mighty Bench, not far from where his art work stood only 12 hours earlier. And he still can't find a lighter, his fingers fidgeting with a useless cigarette.

'I don't think I've ever sat on this bench before,' he says, through a chesty cackle.

It's hard to believe this bit of information, given how many weeks he and his crew spent working on the Subterrufuge build, just meters from this oversized wooden seat which gives a perfect vantage of a vast flat desert-scape, where the view literally stretches from horizon to horizon. But for the distant lip of mountains, you could be out at sea.



The Mighty Bench is one of the only permanent structures on the site at the Stonehenge farm, which between festivals is stripped of absolutely everything relating to Tankwa Town. It was built for the AfrikaBurn community by long-time 'Burner, Cape Town architect Mark Thomas (he of Kirstenbosch Garden's recent Boomslang canopy walkway fame), and his 'Burn family. For the week that this festival happens, the bench draws people to its lookout spot like birds to a roost.

The ashes of the previous night's burn cast a surprisingly thin shadow on the ground, given how many tons of wood held Subterrufuge up. A whisper of smoke coils up from the ashes. Somewhere in that lot are the 50 000-odd screws that held the cones together, all of which now need to be picked up by



volunteers and shipped away. Leave no trace, that's a 'Burn principle.

Honey is a Stellenbosch University jewellery design graduate who doesn't call himself an artist, but rather a craftsman (artists are mythical creatures, he says; craftsmen can charge by the square meter and actually earn a living). And he hasn't worked in the mainstream artistic community since he graduated nearly three decades earlier, from a department where his father Victor Honey was teaching at the time, and was head of first year student admissions.

'He refused to admit me to the department,' Honey's laughter tramples over the tail end of his words, 'he said I hadn't shown enough interest in art. He did apologise, about two years later. After my first year studying science, I went back to him, said *please!*'

This was in the politically volatile '80s, where he got caught up in student politics and joined the End Conscription Campaign. His artistic output wasn't prolific - he was just a student, after all - and soon after graduating left the country 'for obvious reasons'.

'To avoid your military call-up?'

He doesn't answer. But his name appears in a newspaper clipping from 1987, listing 23 conscientious objectors who refused to serve in the South African Defence Force, and there is a one page writeup of his work in Sue Williamson's 2010 book *Resistance Art in South Africa*.

'It was stuff that I did when I was still at 'varsity. I was casting. The jewellery was starting to migrate towards small sculptures. Back then I was very consciously creating stuff that was anti-this and anti-that... it was kind of anti-government, anti-military, anti-violence.'

When he returned to South Africa, he did a bit of media, some design. Then he went into manufacture, sold wooden toys and wooden furniture, did some interior design, tried mural painting and restoration, and turned to furniture design.

'Then I was dragged into the film industry for seven or eight years, which I've just managed to escape from. I kind of burned my bridges.'

He doesn't say more, but his eyes crinkle ahead of his trademark chesty laugh - a sleight of hand to deflect a delicate point, perhaps?

Balloon Guy comes to Honey's rescue.



He ambles over to The Bench, dressed head-to-toe in 'norm-core' - 'hard core normal' clothing - and digs in his shorts' pocket to retrieve a lighter. Not a word passes between them as the flame bites into the tobacco.

Balloon Guy is another of the event's artists, who starts reeling in the string of bridal-white balloons, bloated orbs of helium, that reach up into the sky like some kind of atmospheric morse code. Each one has an LED attached and, come nightfall, he'll do another crazy light show that looks like space rocks burning up as they enter the atmosphere just above the *Binnekring*.

Honey draws in a lungful, sighs.

Working on movie sets is what's given him the confidence to build big, and build fast, he says. Since his involvement with the first 'Burn in 2007, he's built several pieces. Each year, the festival organisers commission a huge piece, the 'San Clan'. This is a giant structure that must, in some way, include an effigy that alludes to the festival's emblem, a silhouette of striding figures in the style of a San rock painting, which symbolises community and unity. The San Clan usually burns on the last Saturday night of the event. This year it burned on the Friday.

Honey has done three San Clan pieces so far, including this year's. But in 2013, on a flight 'from Jo'burg or somewhere', scars on the landscape beneath the flight path got him thinking about doing a piece of protest art for the 2014 event.

'There was this huge scar on the land, and then this row of little dots running up north towards here,' he alludes vaguely to his aerial view of the Tankwa.

'So I drove up to see what the hell it was.'

Another throaty cackle, but not because the subject matter is funny.

'It was a huge energy substation. And those dots on the landscape were just from the human activity around putting up each pylon.'

There's an echo of incredulity in his words.

'Each pylon going up had this clear space around it that you can see from the aeroplane, where the vegetation had been cut back. There's little vegetation to start with, but now there were these scars.'

His words are against a backdrop of pulsing beats which surge across the *Binnekring* from the music rigs that are driven almost 24-7 by DJs in various camps. There isn't much space for acoustic music and live bands, and the electronic music scene fills most of the sound-scape here. There's very little truly quiet time at these 'Burns these days, even though there are supposed to be a few hours with no amplified music between 4am and 7am.

Being a Karoo 'native' - Honey now lives in Sutherland, about 90-minutes' drive east of here - these scars got him thinking about growing fracking interests in the Karoo, led by the private energy



sector and overwhelmingly supported by the South African government.

'Fracking' - truncated from the term hydrological fracturing - is a process of pumping water and various chemicals into subterranean shale deposits in order to shatter the rock and release natural gas which can be used to drive turbines and feed electricity into the grid. It's a highly contentious form of fossil fuel mining, because of the unknown consequences, mostly linked to the potential for groundwater and aquifer contamination. The South African government wants to issue exploration licenses to private energy companies like Shell, who are still crunching the numbers in terms of how much gas there is, and how affordable it is to mine.

'I love the Karoo,' he says, his feet hanging above the ground like a kid on this plus-sized bench. 'I love this space.'

And so, Subterrufuge was born.

Others called them towers or cones, but for Honey, they were spikes, 'violent intrusions, spikes up to 30 meters high coming up out of the flat landscape'.

But then he turned these hard, geometric, symbolically violent shapes into something mesmerising and beautiful. He used carefully placed cladding and colour to blend them into the landscape: browns at the base, merging them into the gravel plains around them, browns then blending into changing shades of blue so that the spikes melt into the sky overhead.



He could have made the sculpture an aggressive black, or red, but he wanted it cloaked in beauty.

'I use colour to...,' he pauses, reaches for the right words, '... to reference the deceit, the kind of hiding of the truth that goes with exploitation by oil companies. So there's a violent intrusion, and then making it look pretty, like everything's going to be fine, it's going to be fine.'

The name of the piece also carries the subtext of deceit. Honey created the name Subterrafuge as a play on words: 'sub', meaning 'under or below a particular level or thing'; 'terra' refers to land or territory; 'fuge' alludes to 'expelling or dispelling either a specified thing or in a specified way'. And, of course, 'subterfuge', the 'deceit used in order to achieve one's goal'.



He submitted the idea to the AfrikaBurn organisers, with the view of building it for the 2014 festival where it would be on display for the week-long festival, and then burned.

First, he drew the idea. Then he built a paper model. Then a wooden model. Then he visited the site several times - first, to get the colours right, then to find the precise location, and later to get the orientation right for all six cones. The orientation wasn't random: he designed it so there are very few vantage points where you can see all six towers. Again, referencing deliberate attempts to hide reality.

Building started in February of 2014, by digging foundations into the bone-shatteringly hard shale, to put in concrete anchors. Then,

The ashes of Subterrafuge, the morning after it burned in 2015





shipping in wood - internal rings of decreasing sizes, struts, tons and tons of cladding. And 50 000 screws.

Building out here is not for sissies. Brutal summertime temperatures press well into the 40s, making work after 9am almost impossible. There's no vegetation to hide from the strafing rays of the sun. It's completely off-grid: no water, no electricity, no sewage system. He had to ship in everything they needed to feed and water his volunteer crew, which included riggers (the kind who do high access rope work on oil rigs and, incidentally, some of whom worked on the South African Large Telescope - SALT - in Sutherland).

The first six or so meters were built using scaffolding; above that, the riggers went up and hung from harnesses and ropes while they hoisted, hammered, bolted and hauled some more, until the final tips were man-handled onto the top of each structure. The smallest cone was three times the height of a person. The largest, 30m.

The exercise nearly bankrupted him and his partner Isa Marques. The 'Burn organisation put up R100 000; he raised another R50 000; and then he and Marques put up another R150 000. At one point, Marques nearly had her water and lights cut off because the costs stretched them so far.

And all of this, to put up an art piece that would have a gallery time of just one week, and then be incinerated.

At least that is what should have happened. The weather, though, had other plans. On the night it was due to burn, the wind started

picking up. Just minutes before Subterrafuge was due to be ignited in 2014, the whole thing was called off, leaving the structure to stand for a whole year until the 2015 festival, when, rumour had it, it would burn 'on the first windless night of the event'.

No-one in Tankwa Town knew, though, when that would be.



This, in the end, is how they said it would come: a messenger will float by overhead, suspended from a floating orb, and will lead you to the towers. When you see that, that's when you know that Subterrafuge's hour has come.

It happens on the Friday. The sky is bruising as the sun dies another gentle death beyond the Cederberg range in the west. This place is improbably big - no trees, no nearby mountains, no buildings to obstruct a view that stretches wider than the imagination. When these towers cast their pre-dusk shadows, they stretch almost a kilometre in length.

The radiant disk has been floating above the *Binnekring* for days, like a second moon in close orbit, but now it's moving, as slow and deliberate as a tectonic flow. The waif, hanging like a trapeze artist beneath it, is barely lit as dusk presses in. She tumbles forward with

the speed of an underwater swimmer. Pivoting from the waist, she spins, hovers. Her legs stride, her arms reach, she pulls herself through the air, clawing towards the towers. She swims forward, tumbles again, floats, rolls, glides. She is a sea creature, gliding through the thin ocean of air. She is Mercury, broadcasting a message to this small world.

Tonight, Subterrafuge will burn.

The crowd beneath her is small, an ebbing, flowing tide in the thrall of the pulling orb. Heads tip back, mesmerised.

Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop...

Hooves?

Crunching over the stark gravel, ghostly whitewashed figures materialise through the crowd. As elongated as Giacometti figures, their heads crowned with antelope skulls, they stride towards the towers with the stiff-hipped gait of stilt walkers.

Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop...

They are silent praise singers, beckoning everyone to Subterrafuge's denouement.

CHAPTER 2: BLANK CANVAS



2 BLANK CANVAS

The celestial lights are doing something weird. Each time the music thumps, they leap sideways like horizontal strobes. Ok, she resolves, she might have overdone it a bit this time. But her belly has expelled the last of the crystals and now she's settled back on the sandy riverbed, in a crucifix pose, riding the train.

She blinks a few times to clear the effect, focuses on the moon again, tests if it's real.

Dhum, dhum, dhum, from the Lighthouse dance floor nearby.

Sure enough: jump, jump, jump. The moon, and a million stellar pinpricks leap, leap, leap sidewise and re-centre.

Single ice blocks in each hand push back the nausea, drilling icy nails through her palms. Her wingman will be back soon with more water.

That man, so beautiful. Life. Is. So. Beautiful.

The universe purrs.



Subterrifuge, as a piece of art, is so embedded in the landscape of the Tankwa, and the festival it's created for, that it would have little

meaning anywhere else. It was built to blend into the expansive, flat, shimmering, tonally sparse desert-scape, making the Tankwa the canvas on which the piece is rendered. It was built to be turned into flame at the AfrikaBurn festival, making the event the gallery in which the piece is exhibited.

Because the location is so remote, and the festival so difficult to get to, and the work ultimately temporary, this piece would only ever be seen in person by a few thousand people.

Tickets are expensive (around R1 000 in 2015). You can only buy them online, most of which are snapped up within minutes of sales opening, which limits access to the hyper-connected. The harshness of the setting calls for pretty high-end camping gear. You have to ship in your own food and water (a recommended supply of 5 litres per person, per day, for drinking, cooking and washing, the latter of which is an optional extra), and haul out all your waste (except 'black water' waste, namely the mucky toilet stuff).

It's a four to five hour drive from Cape Town, the last 90km of which are along a nerve-wracking dirt road that looks as free flowing as an autobahn, but is littered with shredded tyres, like the caricatured skulls of dead cattle in those Western cartoons. The



shale beds throw up small but lethal shards of rock, the kind that would have made ideal prehistoric arrow heads. It's not uncommon to find a vehicle beached on the roadside with two tyres shredded and no cell reception to call for help.

'But ja, how many galleries have 10 000 people walking through them in a week?' Honey snorts merrily, when he's grilled about his work getting such limited exposure.

What, then, *is* this thing, AfrikaBurn?

AfrikaBurn started in 2007 as a regional version of the original Burning Man which happens annually at Black Rock in the Nevada Desert, in the USA. Burning Man is a counter cultural phenomenon that started on a San Francisco beach in 1986 when a group of Bohemians got together to burn a wooden effigy as a statement against the rampant television-fuelled consumerism and the hyper-connectedness of the modern world. They went on to create a 'festival' (it's the only word that comes close to capturing the chimera that this event has become) which they moved into the desert. Burning Man is about radical artistic expression, radical self-reliance, reconnection with community, and 'gifting'.

The 'gift economy' means giving with no expectation of anything in return. Hope to get something back, and it becomes a transaction. No cash should change hands at any of the Burn events, which now has chapters worldwide, except for buying ice which the organisers ship in daily. This is the only way to chill food (and booze)



THE TRIPLE BYPASS is burning again, its etchings glowing red like the runes in a Tolkien-esque elven-world. It's a relic from 2007, when the event was first called Africa Burns. The three metal chimneys still look like squared-off elephant trucks, their prehensile tips nosing the sky. Fires have once more been lit in their base, which throw flames and sparks up the chutes.

Their decay is starting to show: the sides are warped from thermal changes; what started as a rusty blush on their skin, has become the broken veins of age; once strong enough to be glued together with heat and a welder's torch, their metal now looks papery and fragile.

Every time their fires are stoked, the piece's life is shortened a bit more. Eventually, it will begin to slough off oxidised flakes like an autumn tree. But this, too, is just another art piece yielding to the flames, only its passage through fiery metamorphosis is much slower than the wooden pieces.

THERE'S A DOOR out there in the Binnekring. Just a door, in a doorframe, nothing else around it. A strolling figure notices it, and deviates from her path. Her hand twists the doorknob. The door swings open. She cocks her head, smiles, closes the door, continues on her way.

What did she find in there? Herself - full, tall, face-on, staring back from within a door-sized mirror.

'DEAR YOU. THIS is magic. Rocking the Burn with you has been magic. Thank you. Love, Me.' Kiss, kiss.

The postcard arrives via internal mail, courtesy of a Burning Mail delivery man, addressed to: The Flaneur, The Orphanage, 9-ish on the Binnekring, 20m down from the Steam Punk Saloon.



A SIGN OVER Boerassic Park on the corner of 10-ish and Binnekring Road, reads ‘Bly kalm, en spyker ’n boer’ (‘Stay calm, and shag a farmer/Afrikaner’). Inside its farm-gate styled front, people lounge about at tables under an afdak drinking coffee. Bristling direction boards point ‘Moer toe’ (‘To hell and gone’), ‘Maan toe’ (‘To the moon’) and several different destinations in between.

‘I NEED TO get out of the sun. I must to get out of the sun!’

A blue-corset’ed woman, shoulders bared to the inferno overhead, scurries into the shade of a stretch tent. She shoves a kikoy at a friend. ‘Please, you need to help me, make this wet, make this wet!’ Meanwhile she lathers a coat of factor 50 on her freckly skin, aiming for bullet-proof protection.

‘I’m burning. Am I badly burned? It feels like my skin’s melting!’

She’s glowing a warm red. Somewhere in all that, she knows it’s just the mushrooms, it’s just the mushrooms. Everything feels much hotter, much colder!

It’s just the mushrooms.

She dashes back out to a figure who’s gliding in blissful circles on the gravelly surface of the Binnekring, his faded Mauritanian boubou flapping like wings as he dances.

‘I must get him out of the sun. I must get him out of the sun!’



SÉAMAS FROM BOSTON, Balloon Guy’s 2-I-C, has dotted one of the indoor dance floors with balloons, and the crowd is giddy, volleying them back and forth as their bodies surge to the music. Who knows what time it is? The sun’s not up, and that’s enough. The long balloons are helium-filled, and float around the dancers like they’re in zero gravity, spinning gently as people tap and tug them, then coming to rest again in mid-air for a bit before eventually floating up to rest against the tent top.

A LOCH NESS-STYLED dragon, tall as a pantechicon, glows myriad shades of neon, its gaping mouth in a frozen roar as the bakkie and trailer carrying it circle slowly in the Binnekring, thumping out another set of tunes. It brings the music to the people.

Everybody needs to bring something to the community, a gift of some sort, whether it's home made jewellery and trinkets, Vodka shots, shade from the sun, burnable multi-storeyed sculptures, physical theatre, harpsichord recitals, their own elaborate costumes, a safe space in which to get naked, a thumping trance dance music rig, a yoga class, a trail run in the desert, free joints.

The 'Burn is founded on ten guiding principles, which hard-core devotees tend to string through their conversations a bit like rosary beads between a nun's fingers: radical inclusion, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, participation, civic responsibility, immediacy, decommodification, 'gifting', leaving no trace. The South Africans added an 11th principle in 2014, which amps up the proselytising overtones that irk the denouncers (yes, there are those who buy into the culture with an almost smothering zeal): 'each one, teach one', which is about spreading the word about the ethos of the 'Burn, to bring more into the fold.

Some use AfrikaBurn as a place to unplug from the grid, to live in the moment, to get naked, to get high, to reconnect with people, and make eye contact again.

It's been described as a 'clothing-optional event'.

It's been called the biggest gathering of drug users in the country - of course, not a claim anyone can verify, but the cops often have road blocks for inbound travellers. But it's not the hangout of 'drug addicts' and 'mainliners' that one or two writers have suggested. The fact that there's a lot more hugging (there's a *lot* of hugging) than





A NEW ARRIVAL cycles past Boerassic Park, towards a strapping young bloke who's sauntering bare chested and confident. She drops her gaze as she would back at home, lest he feel an unwanted advance, or his space invaded, or that she is forcing an engagement. She fixes her eyes on the gravel, pretends he's not there.

Are our protective walls the things that bring us safety, or the fortresses that cement our social isolation and alienation? There's a new theory that drug addiction isn't so much about the brain's chemical dependence on whatever substance it's hooked on, but that addiction is the bitter fruit of the crippling existential pain of our loneliness in a socially disconnected world.

'Hey, hello!'

He's grinning at her, a huge, full-bodied smile. Non-threatening, free of sexual charge, just warmth.

The tightness in her sternum dissolves. She grins back, pedalling on. She's home.

RAY DOES ANOTHER lap of Binnekring Road, his sequinned silver jacket flashing dizzily in the unfiltered sun. The gnome-like American's bum is seated just centimetres above the ground, knees almost around his ears on the Lilliputian bicycle ('where did he get that thing?'), his feet spinning frenetically to keep the diminutive bike moving.

He's become something of a regular, cruising through the strolling crowd with his '70s porn star sunnies and fedora. Someone sheltering in a nearby stretch tent calls out to him. He waves back, smiles, veers off course for a chat.



there are bar brawls, suggests that people are using psychedelics and relatively benign stimulants like MDMA (ecstasy), rather than booze or tik.

It's a creative space. It's about self-expression. It is both canvas, and gallery.

The festival's mission statement says its a 'participant-created movement, an experiment in inclusive community building, decommodification, creativity, self-reliance and radical self-expression. It is a chance to invent the world anew.'

The spirit of the 'Burn is benign. It's a social experiment at a time in history when the resources needed to survive as a species are under increasing pressure. How do people negotiate the shared living space in this temporary desert village?

There's something very tribal and ancient, and at the same time secular, about the vibe. The call is not to be a passenger here, but to dive right in and become part of the thing. But there are different (brush) strokes for different ('Burner) folks. One person's form of expression, is another's litter.



Back in the event's offices in a scabrous old Art Deco building in Observatory, Cape Town, 'Burn co-founder, creative portfolio lead and liaison Monique Schiess sits back in a chair, puts her feet up, and explains how the idea is to create a playful space where people can bring themselves and their creativity, and apply it to the blank

canvas in any way they choose. What they bring is a gift to the 'commonwealth'. What the commonwealth brings is acceptance, non-judgement, participation, and re-connection.

With degrees in environmental science and social anthropology, Schiess says she was acutely aware back at the start of things, about how depressed one can become by the overwhelming size of the problems faced in this century.

'I mean, fuck, where do you start!?'

Behind her, a sign on the wall declares that this is not a velociraptor-free zone.

'AfrikaBurn is meant to be a tool, where fun is the vector. Because a lot of the problems in the world are because of linear thinking rather than systems thinking. But this is not an intellectual pursuit, it's an experiential moment. People can view, enjoy, and hopefully interact.'

It's a social experiment where people are invited to shed the walls and anxieties which often stop us from expressing ourselves, and prevent us from connecting with others. By creating a space that is collaborative, creative and caring, Schiess and her ilk believe they can foster a different way of doing things, which people can bring back into the 'default' world and change the way communities work together.

'Essentially, it's about relationship. It's relationship to yourself, to your creative side, to others, to the environment, to all sorts of shit.



TWO FIGURES CURL around one another on his shaggy faux-fur coat out in a dry riverbed, lazy and post-coital under the swelling moon. She giggles into his armpit, hoping the figure strolling past a few meters off in search of a place to relieve his bladder, won't notice their half-clad shapes amidst the scrubby veld. Nearby, Subterrifuge is 2-D, ironed flat by a spinning laser light show.

THE ORPHANAGE THEME camp's stoep spills out onto the Binnekring, inviting passers-by to stop in. Some of the orphans are home, lounging about on the cushions scattered across a patchwork of dusty salvaged carpets.

This camp's gift to the community is to create an instant family for 'Burgins' - virgin 'Burners - most of whom are from abroad and don't have the extensive gear needed to survive out here in the desert where the world rubs up against you with sweltering days, chilly nights, dust storms, even occasional flash floods. A tented lounge, a kitchen, a shower. And an instant home away from home. Some neighbouring campers have adopted it, too, to escape the heat, and hang with their new friends.

Wandile plinks the strings of an acoustic guitar, tinkering with one of his tunes.

'Little' Ben's lean torso curves into a lazy C, legs out in front of him, as he mixes some loose tobacco with a bit of dope, and preps a Rizla.

Stofpa (the older Ben, and orphanage father) reclines in an inflatable armchair, waiting for the purple hair dye to fix to his beard. Australians Ella and Ely snooze off last night's big one, oblivious to the chatter. Hannah leans back next to her Jayman, full breasts and bare belly catching the midmorning breeze which tugs absentmindedly at her kimono-style robe.

And hopefully it restores relationship.'

The 'Burn isn't without its critics, maybe because it's so radical in its claims, so grandiose in its ideals, so permissive of behaviour many might ordinarily be frown upon.

How inclusive is it really? It's inclusive to those who manage to get themselves to the gate, which means it's only really accessible to the well-heeled (shorthand for 'white middle class', in this context).

It's carbon footprint often comes up often: shipping all that wood into the desert and burning it; all those 4x4s?

It's just one big self-indulgent orgy for white-collar workers who want to escape the cuffs of their executive board rooms to play fancy dress in the desert.



Defining AfrikaBurn is like trying to grip mist in your fingers. As one 'Burner says online: 'ask 10 of us what it is, and you'll get 11 answers'.

One sign, placard-ing on the *Binnekring*: AfrikaBurn is you.

There's validity in all of those criticisms. Organisers are looking for ways to open it to a more diverse group (2015 was significantly more integrated than previous years). Defenders argue that this isn't claiming to be an eco-friendly getaway, saying that the criticism that it's not 'green' enough is misplaced. Compared with the carbon footprint of most other middle class holidays - skiing trips to Europe,

pilgrimages to Jerusalem or Machu Picchu, year-round 4x4 weekend-ing - a trip to the Tankwa is hardly the biggest offender, they say. And if the people are going to burn money conspicuously on 'play', then gearing up to do Cape Town's annual Cycle Tour is going to set you back way more than the 'Burn, as will the camera gear for a serious amateur photographer.

And yes, the party (meaning, the debauchery) is the more visible side of the 'Burn experience, but certainly not the fullness of the thing, many say.

Schiess reckons it's the natural effervescence that bubbles out when people are invited to play, love, create. Even in terms of the nudity, stripping off isn't about the spectacle of flesh. There may be some flaunting and exhibitionism. But for many, it's about feeling safe enough to be that vulnerable around a few thousand other people.

The fact that so many come away from each 'Burn almost addicted to the high of being in a reconnected space, says something about the dynamic that blossoms in this strange desert nursery. The community makes an Alice-in-Wonderland village together, and throws its doors open to those who want to experiment, learn, and wrestle with the problems of self-organising. It's not always a smooth ride, as negotiating fair and shared use of the village space has proved to be. But, says Schiess, hopefully it gets villagers to exercise muscles that go stagnant in the sometimes passively consumptive world that we live in the rest of the time.



'What happens in Tankwa Town is an experiment. And yes, I think it's possible to bring that way of thinking back into the default world.'

So what happens when you take two square kilometres of blank canvass, 10 000 artists buzzing with their own unique interpretation of what expression means, you give each of them a paintbrush of sorts, and say 'GO'?

Things can get beautiful, and messy.

Which brings us to the matter of MOOP, POOP, and SOOP.

MOOP (noun): 'matter out of place', 'Burn speak for litter. In keeping with the 'leave no trace' principle, it means anything that wouldn't be found in the Tankwa naturally (barring the contents of the pit toilets - that can't go anywhere). Cigarette butts, and feathers shed by people's costumes, are the most common species of MOOP.

MOOPing (verb): the process of picking up MOOP. Done obsessively by some, ignored by others. Involves a lot of bending down to pick things up, and occasional muttering about inconsiderate 'Burners dropping their muck on the ground.

POOP (noun): informally, 'people out of place', which you could argue, is everyone here and maybe the reason most get on so well in Tankwa Town; it's a bunch of odd-balls out here in the sticks.

SOOP (noun): 'sound out of place', the hot-potato issue at the moment. Mostly the hyper-amplified sounds of the growing electronic dance music (EDM) scene.



An art work has been vandalised. The giant cube, a gift to the community, resting on one corner near the roller rink on the *Binnekring*, has its black and purple walls ribboned with words of white chalk. That's ok, the artists intended that and provided the chalk for people to scrawl missives on the piece.

What they didn't intend was that people would reach into the small windows cut into the structure, and tear down or remove mixed media objects, whose messages were about freedom, giving, and the bravery of trying to achieve both.

'The greatest gift you can give is time,' a magazine clipping stuck on the inside of one window still reads. 'Freedom to give,' inside a series of textbook-style illustrations of a growing human foetus. 'Figure 1,' above a blue-haired barbie doll. 'Free woman: free from societal norms, free to be educated, free to vote, free to choose a marriage partner...'

The 'Burn is both canvass and gallery: a place to self-express, and enjoy others' expression. But it brings to mind the balance in the real world between rights and responsibilities. A bit like our Constitution, which upholds the right to freedom of speech, while

also guarding its citizens against the dangers of defamation or even hate speech.

One person's right to swing their fist, ends when it hits another person's face. This is what negotiating the 'Burn space is about: agreeing to work together to figure out where the blurry line is between one person's expression impacting on another's wellbeing.

A message from the artists, scrawled in black marker pen on the roughly torn-off lid of a cardboard box, stuck post-hoc below eye level:

'Someone has exercised their 'freedom' to vandalise our art work in a manner not intended. May your remorse become theirs.
FREEDOM comes with RESPONSIBILITY.'

CHAPTER 3: SHARING SPACES



3 SHARING SPACES

Nathan Honey doesn't seem to want to be interviewed - his brother, Tim, warned that he might be a bit difficult to draw out - and he's not at his camp at sunrise, as scheduled. This is the third or fourth attempt to pin him down.

But it's not Honey's work ethic that's getting fuzzy, the deeper we get into the 'Burn. It's the general timelessness that scuppers any great effort at self-organising.

Instead, the artist is out at the ashes of last night's burn, MOOPing with partner and 'Burn creative coordinator Isa Marques. He looks up from the handful of crap he's picked up, discarded by last night's revellers: cigarette butts, water bottles, beer cans, a fabric bag (contents: government issue condom, still in wrapper; lighter; headache powders; a blister pack of gum, one piece already gone). The circular trench around the Subterrufuge site has become a moat of feathers, mostly white.

(People are asked not to bring feathers, although to say they're 'banned' would be to use the wrong language for this other-world. But its one of the most ignored 'rules' of Tankwa Town. The desert isn't geared up for absorbing litter like this. Neighbouring farmers were picking up feathers on their land many kilometres away after

the previous year's dust storm swept the tented village clean as people were leaving on the final day.)

'I totally forgot about the interview!' he says with a self-conscious giggle, and he throws his arms out in an apologetic hug.

When his fingers find the next piece of MOOP, a cigarette box, its a bit heavier than expected. He snaps the lid back. It's almost full.

'The universe just gifted you free cigarettes.'

'Hmmm,' Marques gives a wry, throaty laugh, 'not exactly free.'

No, building Subterrufuge came at a hell of a cost for them.

Honey takes his place on The Mighty Bench, and starts patting himself down in search of that elusive lighter.

An hour later, he reflects on what's changed the most after nine years of 'Burning it up in the Tankwa: the art works have become more impressive; the crowd has swollen from about 600 in 2007, to 10 000 now; it's lost some of that intimacy.

And then there's the SOOP.

'I don't know if I like the 'Burn anymore. It's too noisy.'

Nathan Honey and partner Isa Marques inside the cathedral-like dome of Honey's 2015 San Clan before it burned on the same night as Subterrafuge



In the early years, once the dance floors shut down for the night, the place sank back into the arms of desert sounds - jackal calls; the dawn chorus; the wind, unobstructed by vegetation, tugging on tent flaps - and the murmur of slumbering campers. With the popularity of the thing, there's been a massive influx of the electronic dance music (EDM) scene, and with it, the culture that goes with certain genres like house, trance, and rave. These days, DJs are playing for dance floors inside stretch tents, next to installations out on the *Binnekring*, and from some of the roving mutant vehicles.

Total immersion in the sound experience, for people choosing this as their artistic expression in the Tankwa, means brawny EDM rigs are shipping in and thumping out earth-shuddering beats almost 24-7, even though there's supposed to be a bit of quiet around dawn. Like many, Honey thinks it's become a bit of an arms race, as one dance floor tries to out-compete another.

Out here in the desert, sound travels, and it now seems to take up much more of the blank canvas than other forms of artistic expression. A harpsichord recital gets drowned out by a belting EDM rig that's carted around on the back of an old VW bus that's mosaic-ed into a mobile mirror ball. Group yoga after dawn has the *thump-thump-thump* in the background. Someone wanting a few hours of sleep has to plug their ears or self-medicate to slumber through the noise.

'I can sleep through anything. What irritates me isn't that the music is bothering me, it's that the person doing it isn't considering whether it's bothering me or not,' says Honey.

Sound as a means of expression has grown at the 'Burn, and as it has, the organisers have tried to contain its footprint to accommodate everyone: they've created 'quiet', 'buffer', and 'loud' zones, with restrictions on how much sound can be used in those spaces, and when. They've tried to impose a mandatory few hours of quiet time between 4am and 7am. Speakers for certain rigs need to be pointed away from the 'suburbs', and bass 'bins' have to be lifted off the ground (the problem with bass, says Schiess, is that it spreads in 360 degrees - 'it just fucking travels everywhere!' - and there's only so much *dhum, dhum, dhum* the average earplug can shut out).

The issue of the almost ubiquitous dance music ignited 'Burners on social media after this year's event.

Those defending the full immersion into amplified sound led with the principles of radical self-expression and radical inclusion as the basis for why they should be able to dance throughout the night and into the next day. Day, after day, after day. Those wanting sleep should be radically self-reliant enough to take care of themselves, they say. Some suggested coping mechanisms: if you want quiet and sleep; use ear plugs; drink until you pass out; go sleep in the quiet zone; don't come to the event!



This music is our contribution to the community, they say, and dancing to it is our form of expression. Your need for quiet is not inclusive of our need for total immersion.

The other side argues that this attitude isn't very inclusive of those wanting a quieter 'Burn experience. Why should the radical expression of the 200 stragglers wanting total immersion in high-octane music at 6am, be at the expense of over 9 000 others who might want to sleep, or enjoy a quiet, reflective dawn?

This is an art festival with music, not a music festival with art, they counter. If you want a 24-7 trance party, go start your own event somewhere else. And even with the three hour dawn quiet time out of 24, the music rigs are still getting the biggest access to the sound-scape.

There's also something of a health case to be made, some argue: people have a biological need for sleep, just as they need food and water. Noise causes stress responses in the body, as does sleep deprivation. Nowhere will you find municipal bylaws addressing problem quiet; bylaws deal with problem noise.

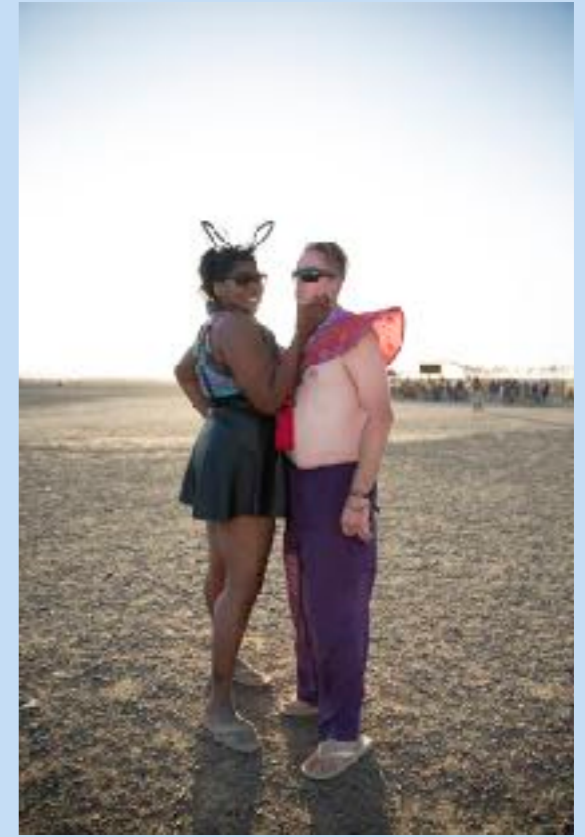
'The problem is inherent in the principles,' explains 'Burn co-founder Monique Schiess. 'They're always going to clash with each other. But I always say, nestled right next to radical self-expression is communal effort.'

The changing sound-scape is a result of the event's own success. As it's become more widely known, and more mainstream, it's attracted this big music scene, and some of the default world thinking about shared communal spaces.

'We have to honour the fact that an immersive sound experience is important to some people. For a lot of people, the 'Burn is just a party. But it's not that for everybody. Getting people to acknowledge the diversity of what the 'Burn is, is very important.'

Burning Man had a similar problem, where, at one point, it also seemed as though the EDM scene was starting to dominate the entire gallery space, at the expense of other people's forms of expression and experience. The Department of Public Works (DPW) - the 'municipality' of the 'Burn that puts the basics of the festival infrastructure in place before residents arrive to pitch their own camps and start to colour way outside of the lines - had their own in-your-face solution.





‘They put together what they called the Barkinator,’ explains Schiess, ‘this huge sound rig, and they made a loop recording of dogs barking. They would drive up to the EDM dance floors and just start barking to make a point. When people complained, they’d say ‘well, this is my sound-scape and it dominates yours’.

She laughs at the audacity of it.

‘Really, the key issue is around when one form of expression oppresses another one.’

Schiess points out that it’s not useful to define the issue in too binary a way, that it’s not about ‘noise’ or ‘music’ versus ‘silence’.

‘The issue is not the music, it’s the thumping...’

She slaps the table with the flat of her hand.

‘... consistent...’

Slap.

‘... persistent...’

Slap.

‘... never ending...’

Slap.

‘... *fuckin’* bass!’

‘This year there were drummers, there were wandering minstrels, those were lovely. Even a rock band that’s not turned up to high

volume, it’s got meat and substance and it’s not this *dhum, dhum, dhum, dhum, dhum* in the background.’

Between events, the inhabitants of Tankwa Town keep slugging it out on Facebook and at the occasional ‘town hall’ meetings in Cape Town. Some call for stricter structures, while trying to avoid words like ‘rules’ or ‘enforcement’, which aren’t in keeping with the *gees* of the thing. Others reckon they just need to leave it to the community to resolve through voluntary buy-in: we all just need to be reminded to play nicely together, and love will prevail.

This is partly what the social experiment is, in this curious alter-reality: a community trying to grapple with rights versus responsibilities. Your fist, my face. Freedom comes with responsibility, personal expression needs to come with an awareness of how that impacts on the ‘commonwealth’ and its members.

“Burners are fuckin’ moaners,’ Schiess laughs, ‘they’ll moan about anything. Which is great! Because they are engaging on an ownership level.’

And while they slug it out on Facebook and at the town hall, their debates chasing each other’s tails, ‘Burn management is coming to the defence of the quieter spaces on the canvas. The solution, argues Schiess, lies in technology, in good town planning, and in simply making an executive decision.

They’re putting together a matrix to work out how much sound to have at the ‘Burn. The space is only 2km squared, and can only



accommodate so many decibels.

'If a camp's dance floor can only take 100 people, you don't need a sound rig that's suitable for a 2 000-person dance floor.'

'Burn organisers already feel they made headway at 2015's event, relative to 2014.

'One thing we might have achieved this year is a return to the more intimate. There was a lot more diversity in sound, and a lot of pockets of lovely little sound-scapes.'

This year they had their first sound rangers, volunteer community mediators specifically to deal with noise issues. They have a sound policy in place. They capped the size of rigs and experimented with lifting bass 'bins' off the ground for the first time.

And rig crews were much more cooperative this year. Last year, when she challenged a rig for making too much noise, she was told to 'fuck off'. This year, crews responded almost immediately when they were asked to quieten down.

'We got a wedge in this year, and we're going to leverage that for next year.'

There's talk of a 24 hour acoustic slot, and revisiting the dawn quiet time.



Back on The Mighty Bench, artist Nathan Honey reflects on the same point.





‘You’ve got to consider other people. Freedom implies being able to do anything without offending or hurting anybody else.’

Wrestling for fair use of the sound-space at AfrikaBurn may seem, on the surface, to be a rather self-indulged exercise by a bunch of entitled elites. But what goes on here isn’t that far from how communities grapple with how to share things in an increasingly pressurised environment, both its resources (like soil, or water), or its ‘services’ (the water cycle, or its waste-absorptive capacity).

Imagine a glass of water, if you will, where the water level is two fingers from the rim of the glass. In this thought exercise, the glass is Earth’s atmosphere, and the space inside the glass is the amount of room there is in the atmosphere to absorb all of the emissions put out by human activities on the planet.

The water in the glass at the moment represents all the emissions put there over the past 300 years by our industrial expansion on the planet. The two fingers of remaining space is what’s left of the atmosphere’s capacity to absorb our future emissions. Once the water level reaches the lip of the glass and starts spilling over, that’s when we’re locked into dangerous climatic change.

We’re already perilously close to reaching the lip of the glass.

Each year, the United Nations holds a climate summit in which it brings together representatives from over 190 countries, to try and hammer out an international agreement to slow greenhouse gas emissions that are driving up global temperatures and changing the climate.

Simplistically, much of these negotiations are about trying to decide who is responsible for the damage caused by the emissions already in the system (the water in the glass), and who gets access to the remaining atmospheric space (the space left in the glass, before we fill it right up). Each country wants its fair share of access to that atmospheric space.

Bring that down to a local level, and it looks like this: one community needs to grow their own food, and needs to use that atmospheric space to mop up the emissions put out as they grow, ship, process, store, and cool that food. Another community needs a safe and reliable water cycle, and so needs the atmosphere to be kept as stable as possible. This means their neighbours should keep their food-related emissions out of the atmosphere.

CHAPTER 4: THE BEGINNING



4 THE BEGINNING

It's a year earlier, on the last Saturday of the 2014 'Burn as the festival reaches its climax. The rangers do their final fire perimeter duties for the night. The San Clan has burned a few hours earlier, and now it's Subterrafuge's turn. After only six days of being formally on display in the gallery of the Tankwa (it was completed well ahead of the festival, but people only started arriving on the Monday before), it's time for it to go.

'The burning is not destruction,' Honey reflects. 'With my works here I've tried to build fire, tried to build flames. So the flame is definitely part of the art work for me.'

One distinctive profile cuts itself out against the dimly lit towers: an eagle-shaped mask of leather and feathers crowns the head of the ceremonial fire master. He has a name (Martin Glinister) but most only know him as the kilted ceremonial fire master with his First Nations staff, putted legs, and waist coat. He's at every burn, and at every 'Burn. When the senior fire marshal gives the go-ahead, it's usually his flaming torch that sets an art work ablaze.

A firm breeze from the north-west has been haranguing the *Binnekring* all evening, and it's picking up pace. A few decorative flags agitate against their flagpoles. And everyone waits. The crowd shifts from foot to foot. Something's simmering inside

people. The tips of the cones point backwards in time, towards the Milky Way. Some of those stars are long-dead, but their light still travelling towards us.

'The flame is a part of the art work. But it's the part I haven't got much control over.'

And the weather is the brush that strokes the fire onto the canvas.

The perimeter rangers and the fire master mill about. It feels as though the universe is holding its breath. Who knows how long everyone's been waiting? Out here, there are no watches. There's only time, which is always sort of now-ish.

Here and there, the rangers begin to fan out towards the audience.

'It's off.'

It's as if the prompt has stepped out from the stage wings, waving his script pages, because suddenly the spell is broken.

'It's off. The burn's off.'

The crowd carries the message deeper into itself, chewing it, swallowing it, digesting it.

'The wind. It's the wind. It's too strong, not safe.'



There's hesitation. Shuffling. Glancing around for confirmation. The disappointment becomes audible, the anticlimax almost takes a physical shape.

'It's off, guys, sorry!' from a faceless ranger in the dark.

Resignation. Acceptance. Not much audible griping. Haphazardly, people begin to stand, dust off their rumps, turn to head back to their little village which, a few days from now, will vanish with almost no trace.

A small group of wanderers tucks in beneath the glow of an angler fish that drifts through the night just overhead, bouncing slowly behind its iridescent lure that forever hovers a few centimetres from its gaping mouth. Beneath it, a dark figure holds the staff from which the fish bobs, and begins a sombre journey back to the village. Like a biblical shepherd, he and his paper-clad wire-frame deep-sea fish light the way home.



'I was upset, hey!'

Back on The Mighty Bench, the ashes of his sculpture finally cooling just meters away, Honey chuckles, remembering that moment, 'but when the decision was made not to burn it, I said I'd be able to make peace with it, if it actually worked against fracking and other exploitation, for the year that it stood.'



The thing with a lot of contemporary art, is that its message isn't always obvious to the viewer. And with Subterrufuge, few ever saw it, beyond the photos which try to capture some of the beauty and scale of this monstrous thing. Many who saw it never knew what it stood for, that it was a beautiful but cloaked thing, representing the shadowy self-serving gas hunters in the corporate world.

But some people did start to pay attention. Anyone who was involved in its build, talked about it, and talked about fracking. Slowly, word spread. A few people made pilgrimages to it through the year that it stood alone on that desert pan. Some academics took notice, one even writing an anthropology paper on it. Different groups wanted to use images of it. Some were environmentalists, others were corporates.

Its fame grew, in a strangely below-the-radar sort of a way. Mercedes Benz wanted it in its in-house magazine ('we had two conditions: no fancy Mercedes in the photo; and they had to say what it stood for'). A reality TV cooking show wanted to film a braai-off next to it. Google Earth captured it from space, its midmorning shadows pointing west. Yoko Ono, herself an anti-fracking activist, dropped Honey a line.

'Nathan, the minute I saw the towers, my mind cleared and my heart relaxed. The bottom part of the towers are earth colour. And the top parts are the colour of the sky. What a beautiful and inspired creation! You could be looking at them and not ever get tired. Thank you for giving us such a great experience. These towers together, expresses the height of nature and human wisdom making its statement together. Yoko Ono.'



The letter starts with the words 'Dear Brad', in a neat, deliberate hand, written with felt-tipped pen across the wing of a butterfly that must have stood many times higher than the wordsmith who penned it. Instead of iridescent butterfly scales, there are swirls and ovals of wood grain.

It's words are well considered. They speak of heartache, and giving up, and seeing patterns of disfunction.

'I don't know what to do. I'm stuck. You aren't yourself and I don't know how to show you that... You're this neutral demon... but I don't have the strength to walk away.'

If you find this, the message reads, let fate decide.

'Love you Always, You know who.'

Beneath it, in black marker, an arrow pointing to the original message, and a simple note: 'You deserve better than that.'

This is what the winged walls of the Metamorphosis temple were built for, to lay down things that no longer serve you, to honour them, to watch them burn, and to start anew.

Every year, the 'Burn has a temple, a sacred space where people can reflect on matters existential. This year's piece, by artist Verity Maud and her crew, is a six-winged metaphor for transformation. Each wing fans out from a central alter. Four archways invite people in, beneath lintels that allude to the elements: earth, water, fire, air.

'So many beautiful hearts built this for you,' someone else wrote.

Another drew a chunky red arrow and wrote 'start fire here'.

'This is it. I hope you burn. You have your wings, now fly,' punctuated with a childlike butterfly drawing.

'Blessed are the peacemakers.'

Someone else, in lipstick: 'You MOOPed your lipstick'.

Each wing is covered with scrawling words, as person after person leaves a message for themselves, someone they ache for ('You left



us too soon'), or the universe. Most of the messages are about love, in rough hand-written words, in calligraphy, in iconography.

This temple is the thin end of the sound wedge which Monique Schiess spoke about, when she mentioned efforts to reclaim some of quieter and more diverse sound-scapes at the 'Burn.

The temple is meant to be a place of quieter contemplation and reflection, and usually burns on the final Sunday of the festival, to a mostly quiet audience. Dance floors turn off their sound systems. People are asked to turn off all their personal lights, and sit quietly and watch. Since the festival has already burned itself out during the Saturday night climax, and most people have packed for home, only a few remain. The tone is gentle, soft, slow.

This year, the organisers have decided to try something different, though. The clan burn - the climax of the event - is moved to the



Friday night, and the silent temple burn to the Saturday, when the population is still big. It is pretty risky, given Tankwa Town will still be seething with energy. Will they be able to calm the villagers down enough to sit in quiet contemplation as the wings of the temple take flight with the flames?

‘It was hard work,’ Schiess admits a fortnight later, ‘weeks and weeks of correspondence with the sound camps. Then physically, on site, going from camp to camp to camp, asking them to remember the 8:30pm switch off.’

There’s a lot of doubt beforehand, that they’ll be able to pull off a silence burn. The crowd slowly thickens around the perimeter at around 8pm, close to the centre of the *Binnekring*. Fire rangers start whispering to the crowd, reminding them that this is a different sort of burn.

‘Pass the message back, ok? This is a silent burn.’

One after the other, the music rigs snuff their speakers. For the first time in nearly a week, there isn’t a drum beat to be heard anywhere. Tankwa Town has come to rest.

The crowd settles. But there’s still some fidgeting. The temple builders have their own ritual they want to follow before ignition, and this means the audience has to wait, and wait, and wait.

People whisper, others *sssshhhh*. The crowd quietens, and then the whispering returns.



Someone howls like a wolf into the domed night: *Whoo-whoo-whoo-whoo-whooooo...*

Another answers him back: *Who-whooooo....*

And another. And another. A call-and-answer, like those old Pentecostals in the American deep south, only more feral, a bit pagan.

SSssshhhhhh... !!!!

Everyone settles...

...pauses...

... a few more whispers...

... pauses.

'Oh for fuck sakes, burn already!' a woman's voice yells out, shrill against the stillness.

Sssssshhhhh... the crowd choruses.

And they settle again. Some whispering, some shushing. A gentle ebb and flow as 'Burners negotiate a kind of social contract amongst themselves in the deepening evening.

Eventually, they come. Eight torch bearers position themselves around Metamorphosis and, in unison, touch their flames to the wood. It takes a while for the fire to grow, but soon it fingers its way up the ribs of each wing, the humming, cracking, roaring steadily filling the space between sounds on this breathless night.

'There it goes!' someone whispers, forgetting himself.

The flames take their time to spread, drawing lines along the cutout edges in each wing.

Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha... a primal cry from out there in the night.

The flames crest the wingtips, hungry now, and unstoppable. Above the temple, the thickening smoke cloud draws in a chest-full of air, swells, sucks the flames up into the sky, and billows in glory. The time between the involuntary cries from the revellers elongates. The chorus line of faces glows around the radiant alter, improbably hushed. The moment is as delicate as a pupa.

Then, like a page in a book being turned by a breeze, one wing folds to the left. It taps the next, blowing that page over, too.

The crowd can't help itself.

Wo-hooooo... !!!

Sssssshhhhhh...

Even the dust devils seem to be paying attention. Small and nimble, they pirouette around the rangers, almost inviting them to dance.

One after another, the wings of Metamorphosis turn, until the book is folded closed and the flames engulf it finally.

The pages, the words, the pain and memories and intentions, all gone. The space they held, swept clean. In that moment: death. In that moment, life.

And where there's life, there's always a whisper of hope.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Special thanks to all the people who helped inform the ideas, memories, images, and words in this piece.

Nathan Honey, Isa Marques, Monique Schiess, Roger van Wyk, Voytek Modrzewski, all the 'Burners who wrestled with the sound issue, and some who helped crowd-source a few extra memories after the fact.

Thanks, too, to Hedley Twidle and Virginia MacKenny for panel beating the scope and angle of this piece, and for giving the story room to roam.

And, mostly, to Ben Schoeman, who, through a series of magical pilgrimages into the Tankwa outside of 'Burn season, transformed this remarkable structure into so much more than an art work, and turned the place into a parchment upon which a beautiful chapter has been written.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

The author is torn.

She would love to put her byline at the top of this story, but doing so would build her 'brand name' as a writer. This is not in the spirit of AfrikaBurn, which is about de-commodification and not profiting from what happens at the 'Burn. So she's going with a *nom de plume* for now.

Her ego isn't happy about this decision.

How her 'Burn persona became known as 'Curly' is another story, involving a cheap wig and aspirations to look like an Olde Worlde brothel madam. Her ego isn't terribly happy about this turn of events, either. Leigh Page is to blame.



Photo by Leigh Page

ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Michael Groenewald is a superbly talented amateur photographer who isn't profiting from this piece and has gifted the AfrikaBurn community with giga-dozens of images.

Curly insists that he has his byline attached.

To the bloke who took Michael's camera and snapped this picture, we'd love to credit you. Whoever you are, drop him a line.



The photographer who took this image remains unknown. If you can help us remedy this, please do

FOOTNOTE



Opposing military call-up

In August 1987, while the struggle against apartheid saw the security forces growing more and more vicious in its attempts to quell opposition in the burning townships, 23 young conscripts publicly declared their refusal to serve in the South African Defence Force (SADF).

They called a press conference in Cape Town, at the church on Buitenkant Street which now houses the District Six Museum, and issued this statement.

Back row, left to right: PJ Hope, Mike Briggs, David Green, Mark Behr, Glen Goosen, Michael Rautenbach, Jean du Plessis, Luke Cornell, Tim Honey (Nathan's brother), David Waddilove, Pieter van der Riet.

Front row, left to right: Chippie Olver, Jaco Malan, Andrew Merrifield, Bernard le Roux, Ivan Toms, Jonathan Melunsky, JoJo Shapiro, Nathan Honey, Andries du Toit, Ben Schoeman.

ONS WEIER OM IN DIE SAW TE DIEN

Ons is 'n groep Suid-Afrikaners wat deur die wet verplig word om in die SAW te dien. Ons glo dat ons land se belange beter sal bevorder deur te weier om in die SAW te veg. Die wette van hierdie land maak hierdie besluit 'n ernstige een. Ons voel egter dat morele keuses, hoe moeilik ook al, nie vermy kan word nie.

Ons glo dat ons land in 'n burgeroorlog gewikkel is. As blankes word ons gedwing om aan een kant van hierdie konflik te veg.

Ons glo dat hierdie konflik veroorsaak word deur die stelsel wat as Apartheid bekend staan. Hierdie stelsel belemmer verhoudinge tussen ons land se mense en met ons buurlande. Dit veroorsaak armoede en ongelykheid, haat en geweld.

Ons glo dat die noodtoestand 'n oorlogsverklaring teen die mense van Suid-Afrika is. Die SAW word teen die jeug van die townships en lede van die vryheidsbeweging gebruik. Hierdie mense is nie ons vyande nie. Hulle is ons mede-Suid-Afrikaners en ons weier om teen hulle te veg.

Ons glo dat geen Suid-Afrikaners 'n nie-rassige demokratiese samelewing, waar almal gelyke regte het, hoof te vrees nie. Dit sal stabiliteit, vrede en voorspoed bring. Solank hierdie stelsel voortbestaan, sal die burgeroorlog wat besig is om ons land en sy mense te vernietig, slegs vererger.

Ons glo dat die SAW nie 'n skild is waargter vredesame verandering kan plaasvind nie, maar dat dit eerder 'n instrument vir die beskerming van minderheidsvoorregte is. Die SAW oortree keer op keer internasionale reg. Dit beset Namibie tans onwettig. Dit skend die soewereiniteit van ons buurstate en pleeg dae van aggressie teen die burgers van hierdie lande.

Die SAW verteer die rykdom van hierdie land, rykdom wat nodig is vir gesondheid, behuising en opvoeding.

Dit is teen ons morele beginsels om aan so 'n instansie deel te neem.

Ons glo dat daar 'n toekoms is waar alle Suid-Afrikaners in vrede kan saamleef. Ons onderneem om te bou aan daardie toekoms en om deel daarvan te wees. Om in die SAW te dien druis in teen hierdie voorneme.

ONS WEIER OM IN DIE SUID-AFRIKANSE WEERMAG TE DIEN

B.D.J. Schoeman
Augustus '87

CHRISTIAN OUDER

BERNARD LEROUX

Jean du Plessis
Honey

I. Toms
I.R. IVAN TOMS

M.C. BEHR

D.A. GREEN

J.M. Malan
J.M. Malan

PIETER VAN DER KIEF

WE REFUSE TO SERVE IN THE SADF

We are a group of South Africans compelled by law to serve in the South African Defence Force. We believe our country is best served if we refuse to fight in the SADF. The laws of this country make this a serious step to take. Yet, we feel there comes a time when moral choices, no matter how difficult, cannot be avoided.

We believe our country is experiencing civil war. We, as whites are conscripted to serve on one side of the conflict. Yet this war is not of our making, nor is it of our choice.

We believe that the root cause of the war is Apartheid. It is indefensible. It poisons relations between our people and with our neighbouring countries. It creates poverty and inequality. Its bitter fruits are hatred and violence.

We believe that the State of Emergency is a declaration of war against the people of South Africa. The SADF is deployed against township youth and members of the liberation movement. These people are not our enemies. They are fellow South Africans and we will not take up arms against them.

We believe that South Africans have nothing to fear from a non-racial democratic society where all have equal rights. It will bring stability, peace and progress. Until Apartheid is abolished, the civil war that is tearing our country apart can only intensify.

We believe that the SADF is not a shield behind which peaceful change can occur, but an instrument for defending the privileges of a minority. The SADF continually contravenes international law. It illegally occupies Namibia. It violates the sovereignty of neighbouring states and commits acts of aggression against the citizens of these countries.

The SADF consumes the country's resources, resources that are so desperately needed for health, housing and education.

It is against our moral principles to participate in such an institution.

We believe there is a future where all South Africans can live in peace and harmony with each other. We pledge ourselves to build and be part of that future. To serve in the SADF would contradict such a pledge.

WE REFUSE TO SERVE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN DEFENCE FORCE

R. Snellhage

Nathan Honey

JONATHAN SHAPIRO

JONATHAN MELNISKY

LUKE CORNELL
K. Hone

GLENN GOOSEN
DAVID WADDILOVE

ANDRÉ VAN TOIT

ANDRÉO MERRIFIELD

MICHAEL RAUTENBACH

BLANK SIGNATURE