



A sporadic eruption of desert art nods to humans' ability to adapt.

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A creative celebration of evolution

Burning Man 2009: Evolution

Black Rock Desert, Nevada

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The Burning Man festival is a unique happening. For one week in September every year, the featureless Black Rock Desert in Nevada hosts a temporary community of artists, technologists and visionaries. Lacking paved roads, water, electricity and any permanent structures, Black Rock City emerges from the ephemeral lakebed, or playa, with a population of nearly 50,000. Afterwards, it disappears without trace, only to be reconfigured a year later.

Fittingly for the 2009 iteration of this social experiment, this year's theme was 'Evolution'. In the 23 years that Burning Man has been replicating, certain behaviours have been selected for by the inhabitants: radical inclusion and tolerance, self-reliance coupled with extreme altruism, a gift economy and a leave-no-trace environmental ethic. Add intense creativity, conscious participation, ingenuity and a propensity for hedonism, and the outcome is an unparalleled celebration of the human spirit.

The principal vehicle is art, from giant sculptures and lavish pyrotechnics to countless instances of the most basic art of human interaction: giving and receiving. The 'man' effigy is the centre of the festival, both figuratively and literally. This year, the 12-metre human shape hovered over a thorny forest — a tangled bank — atop a giant double helix. The DNA molecule provided a powerful artistic meme, representing both life's

capacity to evolve through genetics, and perhaps something that needs to be overcome through non-genetic evolutionary paths. Viewed from a different angle, the man seemed to float above a field of sea lilies, placing this celebration of human consciousness in an ancient evolutionary context.

The most striking image at this year's Burning Man, expressed in various ways across the city, was the famous "ascent of man" progression from great ape through to modern human, with the Burning Man icon representing the next step. This sequence resonated with the advance in human culture realized in Burning Man. One vision was the Fishbug, *Chimera sententia*, a creature rising out of the playa with an arthropod tail, amphibian body, mammalian trunk and oversized primate brain.

We created a zone at Burning Man that explored atavisms — reappearances of past events in new contexts — in human social evolution. At our Atavism Camp we created 'The Spandrel', a shade structure built with materials salvaged from the 'boneyard' at the University of Washington's Friday Harbor Marine Lab: leftover materials from past experiments, now reborn for a new purpose. At a symposium entitled 'Evolution and Society', we asked how society has interpreted evolution and whether, despite its shadowy past, its principles can guide us to a much-needed behavioural shift towards sustainability.

In the rampant transfer of culture at Burning Man, on a par with endosymbiotic events, we see hope. Evolution is evoked here on many levels: the adaptation and thriving of the



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individual in this extreme environment, the various camps as interactive and artistic spaces, the city as it alters over the seven days and from year to year, exhibiting emergent properties of altruism, shared community and free expression. 'Burners'

become extremophiles. With resources scarce in the desert, intense sharing is the most efficient practice, suggesting that humans may yet realize a sustainable evolutionary trajectory.

Next year's theme of 'Metropolis' moves the festival a step further. Cities embody the best and worst of humanity, and Black Rock City is no exception. With its preponderance of oversized gas-guzzling camper vans, fossil-fuel-powered generators and gratuitous combustion, it is no Utopia. But the City's Alternative Energy Zone, with its huge bank of solar panels, multiple experiments in grey-water evaporation, and wind-powered cocktail bar, is paving the way.

Exodus from the barren plain brings us to the comparative paradise of juniper, sage and pinyon jays. Likewise, evolution beyond Burning Man embodies what happens off the playa, how we share and act upon our experiences. ■ **Jason Hodin**¹, **Cory D. Bishop**², **Fred A. Sharpe**³ and **Ruben E. Valas**⁴ are evolutionary biologists.

¹Hopkins Marine Station, Stanford University, California, USA.

e-mail: seastar@stanford.edu

²Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

³Alaska Whale Foundation, Seattle, Washington, USA.

⁴University of California, San Diego, La Jolla, California, USA.

For more on evolution, see www.nature.com/darwin.

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