



Stanford Goes to Burning Man, A Series of Interviews

By Alexandra (Mac) Taylor, '20

Undergraduate Research Fellow, Bill Lane Center for the American West

Fall 2018

<http://artswest.stanford.edu>

Liam Kinney: Class of 2016



Alexandra (Mac) Taylor: I am here today with Liam Kinney, a recent Stanford graduate, now working in San Francisco who has attended Burning Man multiple times. Liam, thanks for talking with me. The first question I want to ask is: how did you first hear about it Burning Man?

Kinney: One of the girls that I was living with at the time— a close friend and former roommate back in Synergy— was the first to mention it to me. She had been there a couple of years before and was a huge advocate for it. It wasn't really on my radar, you know,

taking 10 days out of your summer did not sound really logistically appealing to me. Then three weeks before the actual event she mentioned that one of her friends dropped out and she needed someone to take the ticket, as a favor. I decided to be spontaneous and accept this offer to go.

Taylor: So, you attended Burning Man as a group, then, with your friends. What was your first impression of the experience?

Kinney: I attended in a small group of 7 and my first impression was that it was all about community. We were a diverse group of friends thrown together in a camp and from all over the map— some from Canada, some from the Bay Area, etc. We were a

small group of strangers within a larger pool of over 70,000 strangers. But, they very quickly turned from strangers into friends and not just the group of seven, but the group of 70,000. And, so, my first impression was just that these social barriers we put up to keep us from approaching each other... they kind of melt away when once you're there.

Taylor: What was your most memorable experience if you could pick one?

Kinney: It's a really hard to dilute any experience down to one moment— but, I guess if we're going on the theme of community, the most memorable moment was sitting on top of the trailer that we rented, arm in arm with all my friends. We were watching the sunset, and every single sunset there's this howl that everyone does the moment the sun drops below the mountains, so everyone starts howling and it just reminded me that we were all part of the same experience. It just reinforced this notion of mutual and shared community.

Taylor: While you were there did you see any art that particularly struck you like art cars, sculptures, etc.? Did you have a favorite piece and what was it like?

Kinney: I think the biggest paradigm shift I had art-wise was with the art cars. I just never have seen anything like it. It was a medium that really resonated with me because I really like interactive art. And, you know, what I normally do at night would be to go out with friends, drink, listen to music, look at interesting stuff in a bar context. At Burning Man, you can do that on a moving kind of bar/club and that's what an art car is and that was just a medium that really resonated with me. So, I think art cars are just like the coolest medium ever. The art cars are special because they're so unique to Burning Man— that's the only time we ever see one.

Taylor: Speaking of moving cars, or combining art & technology, what were your impressions of the use of tech in the conception of some of the art on display there, perhaps in the cars or in other forms or mediums?

Kinney: My actual favorite piece of art wasn't even an art car. It was this group of concentric rings. It's a really popular exhibit. It's this group of rings that they always put really deep out in the desert. We call it the "deep playa." And it is like this visual representation of the sonic atmosphere. So, basically all the sound and music that's

happening at one end of the concentric rings shows up as the rings are lighting up and kind of representing sound waves and music. And that was really cool for me because it's sort of like combining two senses, and synthesizing things. I think Burning Man is all about synthesis. Tech and art combined is one of the ways that this happens. I think those rings represent a way in which tech meets art meets the senses. Also, again, it's one of those things that can only happen in that medium because it's incredibly flat. You can have a bunch of concentric rings that take up probably two hundred feet. So, both spatially and sonically, it's a really unique exhibit.

Taylor: You've been mentioning community quite often. Speaking of community, what was it like to be a participant in the 10 guiding principles of shared community that characterized the Burning Man experience? For example, gifting, communal effort, leave no trace. Was there one that particularly struck you or you felt was most prevalent?

Kinney: I didn't actually know that there were 10 guiding principles of community of Burning Man until I went my second year and I saw them posted somewhere. But, I've actually talked with my friends about how "gifting" is a really weird and almost misleading term for that principle. It's more like meeting and then acquiring, because if I need more water for our camp, I go to a camp next door. Yes, I suppose they are gifting me water, but "gifting" implies that the impetus was on their side, but really if you need or if you even want something, you just look for it and it will appear for you. And that's not gifting so much as acquiring or making available everything that anyone could ever need. Now that I'm thinking about it, though, gifting is actually a pretty good way to put it.

Taylor: Something else you talked about— you mentioned that what was so unique about Burning Man is that the art is very specific to that certain location and that certain time. But there are several efforts being made for museums to acquire Burning Man art and Burning Man pieces and make them more permanent in that sense. What do you think about the idea of those different artworks being removed from their space at Burning Man and being on presentation somewhere else in an entirely different environment?

Kinney: There is a special quality about Burning Man art because it's so unique and ephemeral and hard to get to. It takes a lot to get there. And, you know, I can't really speak to whether it would lose that magic by being around the corner; being like an Uber ride away. I do like reflecting on Burning Man stuff and I actually really like attending these Burning Man decompression sessions that usually have some art representation or reflection. But, you know, I think the event itself will always have that special quality. And so, I think when you take the art outside of it, I think it will lose some unique quality, but some of the art there is just so amazing and it's worth preserving. I actually am not against putting art in museums or in your backyard where I've seen it sometimes or in other places and appreciating it there because, you know, it's still art and I think it should be appreciated. Obviously, I think you should probably ask the artist what they think on a case-by-case basis, but I don't have an ideological sense of preserving that for myself. I don't want to keep it for myself; I would rather the world get to experience it.

Taylor: My last question for you today is: when you think about Burning Man and the multiple experiences there, if you could sum up the experience in one word or perhaps a phrase what would it be?

Kinney: Bright. The thing that really blows you away when you're there is just how lit up everything is. And I just don't even know how they bring that much energy to the desert. It surprised me that everything was so lit up, and on a deeper level, it surprised me how deeply everyone there thinks about life. Maybe those seventy thousand participants are a privileged and small swath of humanity, but I was struck time and again by every single conversation I had with strangers there about how just bright and intelligent they were. I sometimes get lulled into the sense that I'm part of some special group coming from Stanford, surrounded by smart and exceptional people. But the people who come to Burning Man... they bring stories and wisdom that I never would have gotten outside of my bubble. And so overall, the people I met there impressed me as bright and witty adventurers.

More information: <http://artswest.stanford.edu>