

editorial

Life Imitates R™ark (per se) or Commodifying the Antagonistic

There have been a lot of bizarre events happening in the infoculture. The initial subject I had intended for this editorial came from a note I received weeks ago -- a missive on U.S. John Poindexter's terror betting pool, called the *Policy Analysis Market*. Weeks later I heard that the organizers of Burning Man wish to export the Burning Man 'experience' into the mainstream culture, for which I hold great trepidation; not regarding the idea of mainstreaming Burner culture, but for the gesture itself. While these two 'news items' seem to be unrelated at first glance, they point to a certain trend of establishing market structures for anything ranging from the unearthing of anti-democratic threats to the spreading of the anti-consumerist message. There seems to be an underlying narrative of 'commodifying' the antagonistic -- that which is inherently aimed at undermining the basis of commodification.

A few weeks ago, I got a note from Alex Galloway of RSG for a governmental site called policyanalysismarket.org (now defunct, and references to it on CNN are as well). Given the culture of new media activism and its strategies of hoaxes and detournements as used by organizations such as R™ark, The US Department of Art & Technology, the Electronic Disturbance Theatre, Hacktivist, and so on, my initial impulse was to write back congratulating on a marvelous hoax, as this system seemed too absurd to be true. The site described an online terrorism futures market where citizens, stockholders, and even terrorists themselves (oops!) could speculate on terrorism, coups d'etats, and governmental insurrections. Investors could create anonymous accounts and invest money into the system, which -- given the fact that Poindexter was also the conjurer of the 'Total Information Awareness' system -- makes credibility regarding the anonymity of such a system highly circumspect.

The rationale behind the PAM scheme relates to statistical research suggesting that market indices frequently act as leading indicators for future events. As stated by the Pentagon, "Research indicates that markets are efficient and timely aggregators of dispersed and even hidden information."



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The problem with the system was threefold in that 1) assumptions about markets as accurate indications of future events are questionable at best; 2) such a system is a PR blunder of legendary proportions; 3) due to the anonymity of the system (if maintained), terrorists themselves could take part. Even if one assumes that betting games could be of statistical merit, the proposed futures market could have been a simulation rather than one based on real currency. Fortunately, the program lasted approximately ten hours, as the media caught onto the obvious demerits of PAM rather quickly and the plans for it were

the ruse while 'extra-institutionals' such as students at a Plattsburg lecture quickly realized the absurdity of the event (bombarding the Yes Men with inflatable globes).

There seem to be two points to the unfolding of these events. First, the absurdity of decisions made by American officials, and the sometimes ridiculous nature of many global power structures as they manifest themselves in the development of the PAM system -- which, by the way, had spent over \$750,000 by the time of its unveiling. Secondly, it appears that there is still a sizeable population outside the institu-

Poindexter are developing policies as bizarre as any crackpot R™ark scheme, I'm heartened to see that by and large, people can still detect obvious idiocy at a distance. Now we just need to react to the not-so-obvious...

On my second note, I recently read an article on Rhizome about the desire of Burning Man exec Larry Watson to 'export' the Burner culture into mainstream society. The idea is to spread the creative, anti-consumerist message through a series of spin-off events throughout the US and other places, based on a "Burning-Man-Film-Festival-in-a-Box" template. Already, representatives around the country, from Minneapolis to New Orleans, support creating a 'remote' Burning Man experience so that people can "feel a part of Burning Man without ever coming here" (Watson). The plan calls for the implementation of regional festivals and then the establishment of an online grass-roots social activist network.

The plan seems to be pretty straightforward: to create pseudo-clones of the festival within regional contexts, then expand into a continental, or world-wide social network. Having Burned one year myself, it would be a welcome sight indeed to have the BM culture permeate the mainstream. The point where the plan seems to get problematic is the idea to replicate a singular cultural event that operates in a unique context. I couldn't help ranting about the creation of Burning Man Clif Bars, hiking shoes, etc. Watson mentioned that Black Rock LLC (Burning Man's holding company) has had a number of offers for licensing and my point has little to do with any threat of overt commodification of the

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This breaking of the suspension of disbelief is one of the reasons why I still have some hope for society as a whole; very little at times, but hope nonetheless. In other cases, there is a disturbing lack of disbelief within institutional bounds: in the R™ark-sponsored WTO spoof, the Yes Men appear at international trade conferences and press events as members of the World Trade Organization, suggesting 'plausible' solutions to global trade issues such as the privatization of elections and the recycling of food through fecal filtration. The surprising aspect of the presentations is that the conference participants seldom catch

tions that retains a modicum of critical engagement and can figure out these issues to a point where it appears that the Emperor is, in fact, quite naked. The problem seems to be that there is a certain disconnect: those who are discerning are neither the masses as depicted by media polling nor are they necessarily embedded within the infrastructures of the world's dominant institutions of power. But (from my experience) these dissenting individuals and groups are well educated, and not disempowered in any sense, another reason for hope. In times where it seems blatantly obvious that the inmates are in charge of the asylum and where people like

Burning Man franchise. The issue is not that of spreading the culture but the way in which it is done. Although BM seems antithetical to branding, it would need to all but strip its name and/or likeness from any satellite festival to keep BM from becoming an 'anti-brand;' but this could lead to other disconnects between organizers and groups. Burning Man also has a certain cultural / contextual uniqueness that makes it all the more valuable and likewise problematic in regards to (re)creation / propagation.

Burning Man's uniqueness comes from a specificity rooted in the context of where it is held (Black Rock, Nevada), and in the sense of the Bey-esque 'Temporary Autonomous Model' it is based on. I wonder if BM can actually be retooled to fit regional spaces. The remoteness of Burning Man is also part of its cachet as a sort of aesthetic vision quest, as one has to go to some trouble to get to the event. Would I rather march in a Mardi Gras parade as part of a Burning Man krewa or camp out near Austin than take the semi-arduous trip to Black Rock? From the comfort perspective, of course I would love to be able to get in the car and drive a scant few hours to a place where I could easily retreat to civilization. But Burning Man Austin isn't Burning Man, and shouldn't be.

Perhaps the goal is not replication of Black Rock per se, but the propagation of the cultural memes incubated by Burning Man. It could be said that with the spin-off festivals, Burning Man risks a symbolic exhaustion because much of its power lies in the singularity of the event. In many ways, spreading out could result in a dilution of the singularity of the Black Rock mythology, and therefore act counter to Watson et al.'s aims by actually diffusing the power of Burning Man.

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In American culture, which seems to be so dominated by consumer culture models, is the only response to success that of mass production? What if City Lights Bookstore, realizing the potential for the expansion of Beat culture, decided to create regional events or even went to the extent of creating City Lights bookstores and coffee shops tailored to provide a 'Beat' experience? Of course I'm adopting a polemic stance here but that particular bookstore became a scion of alternative culture, promoted ideas through a press, did very well as a singular entity, and in many ways benefited from retaining the uniqueness of its cultural nexus.

Is there a perception that, if a business, event, or entity is not expanding, it must be in decline? This is probably a result of market economics finding a cultural manifestation in an entity's desire for mindshare in any particular ideology of a given society. This is a pretty basic strategy in political marketing, but instead of creating satellites -- which implies a centralized organizational structure that is anathema to the Burning Man festival -- those satellites could represent festivals; not directly affiliated with Black Rock LLC but part of a loose confederation of cultural revolutionaries driven by the common goal to promote the ideals of freedom and expression initiated at Burning Man. This idea may be very close to the plan

in place, but adopts a distributed model rather than a more centralized network. And if one wants to consider the promotion of Burning Man ideals in the larger culture, perhaps this might be a stronger model.

I don't feel that American culture will be witnessing Burning Man Clif Bars or will allow PAM in the near future, but both can be considered as artifacts of what seems a bizarre culture. These are clear indicators that without a certain sense of mindfulness (one which I frequently fall far short of), governmental policies rivaling the lunacy of any interventionist event or the commodification of the most anarchistic of cultural sites seem to be all but inevitable. It's a difficult prospect for even the most astute minds to consider how they are shaping culture on a moment by moment basis; one would like to think that a person does not have to consider every action they took every moment of the day. But for those inmates of the asylum who find the keys in their hands, this seems to be the mandated responsibility in an era where so much is in flux. Both the PAM and Burning Man happenings make me wonder what impact the new media practitioners, embedded in decentralized networks, have upon the larger culture...