

Metafiscal Services in the Middle of Nowhere

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ABSTRACT

For the past four years, we have been a part of a collective of artists, activists, scholars, and engineers working on an interactive sound, light, and theatrical installation known as the KTM, or “Karmic Teller Machine.” This small booth has been installed annually in Black Rock City, site of the Burning Man festival in the remote Black Rock Desert, north of Reno, Nevada. Like an ATM, the KTM offers passers-by “interactivity,” but the transaction is reconfigured into an experience of sound and light, a qualitative rather than a quantitative outcome. Raising questions about technological epistemology and causality, the KTM “banks” on a type of apophenia, or perceived synchronicity, that can be found in experiences as diverse as the dances of the Merce Cunningham dance company, the sound walks of Janet Cardiff, and the variety of chance operations inherent in the fortune cookie or the magic 8-ball. Conceptually, the KTM hovers in a space between the avant-garde, the pedestrian, and the oracular. Artistically, it hovers between the medium of music, theatre, installation, and visual art. At the same time, we have conceived the KTM as an opportunity for an interrogation of the Burning Man festival itself. Is Burning Man a counterpublic, politically radical space? How do the stated principles of the festival, including “radical inclusion,” “gifting,” “decommodification,” and “radical self-expression” operate in practice? What kind of art-consuming public is called into being in such a space? Most important to us: what would a critical art practice look, sound, and feel like in such a context? Our paper will discuss the operation and effects of the KTM, situate it in the context of Burning Man, and explore ideas about the relationship between “radical” spaces, audiences, and artistic production.

1. Introduction/Description

For the past four years, we have been a part of a collective of artists, activists, scholars, and engineers working on an interactive sound, light, and theatrical installation known as the KTM, or “Karmic Teller Machine.” This small booth has been installed annually in Black Rock City, site of the Burning Man festival that takes place for the week preceding Labor Day in the remote Black Rock Desert, north of Reno, Nevada.



The KTM consists of a five-sided pentagonal booth shaped like a truncated cone. The frame is made of 2-inch welded aluminum pipe, and it stands approximately eight feet tall. The top of the cone is fitted with a 48 inch Jacob's ladder, mounted in a plexiglass tube, that extends above the booth like a stovepipe. The booth is sheathed in silver tarp, which covers four of the five sides; the tarps overlap the fifth side, which serves as the doorway. The inside of the KTM is fitted with a triangular counter just above waist height that occupies the space immediately opposite the door. The other four interior planes of the booth have trapezoidal panels that hang parallel to the angled legs of the frame, above the counter, roughly at eye level.



The KTM has been conceived principally as a sound piece. The panels, entering their third iteration, are essentially decoys: configurations of sculptural elements, switches, dials, keypads, and displays on which visitors “set their PIN.” The KTM is actually activated by a large, illuminated button on a control box on the counter. Pushing the button triggers a microcontroller that sets a series of bright LED strips pulsating and flashing. The microcontroller randomly selects an audio track from two “decks” of fifty-two thirty-one second tracks. This also engages the Jacob's ladder, which sends a 5,000-volt arc up the length of its copper rods. This acoustic adventure is referred to as “checking your balance.”

The KTM is “site specific” in not only the conceptual and aesthetic senses, but in the geographical and temporal senses as well. The terms of its multiple site-specificities are elastic – stretched tightly over existing forms, shaped to them, attached to them, but also always in some sense a negative imprint. This is where we see the critical capacity of the KTM. It is both an object and an event that literally could not happen elsewhere. It is a sound piece, but it is not insulated from the often cacophonous sonic environment of the festival. In name, it gestures toward both the quotidian ritual of visiting an ATM as well as a pop-culture notion of karma, but makes no claim to either of these as part of its workings, its intent, or the content of the sound pieces. The KTM also operates on an increasingly elaborate illusion of interactivity, which means that it can easily fail from an artistic perspective. It is part of the Burning Man festival, but it enables and facilitates an interrogation of the event itself through a kind of counterpublic¹ address.

2. The Context

In literal physical terms, the site of the KTM is the Black Rock Desert. The location itself has a shifting and contradictory identity. It is federal, public land, but not a National Park. It is a virtually flat expanse of 1000 square miles. In the winter it is frozen; in the spring it is an enormous, shallow mud-bottomed lake. In the summer months it eventually dries to a dusty, hard-packed playa. Originally, the festival bore a practical relationship to the site, which was chosen, at least in part, for its inhospitability, its remoteness, and the consequent isolation from social norms and law enforcement.

The Burning Man festival itself has a complex history and a shifting identity (see burningman.com for links to pages with a timeline, history, and commentaries). It is, literally, impossible to characterize in any single way: it's a communal desert camping experience, a rave, a pilgrimage, a celebration, a pick-up spot, a technology fair, and an art event – all of which are part of an intentional, temporary urban fabric. Every cliché about Burning Man is true, and each cliché partakes of adjacent clichés. Dance meets spirituality, sex meets technology, art meets nature.

The mission statement of the organization that produces the festival says, in part, that “Our intention is to generate society that connects each individual to his or her creative powers, to participation in community, to the larger realm of civic life, and to the even greater world of nature that exists beyond society.” The event is organized around ten principles. Some of these, such as “radical self-reliance” and “leave no trace,” are practical given the harsh conditions of the desert and the conditions the event must meet for its use permit through the federal Bureau of Land Management. Others are structural and political: the principles of “gifting” and “decommodification” work effectively to keep the event non-commercial while it is taking place; the principles of “radical inclusion,” “communal effort” and “civic responsibility” articulate a sense of an egalitarian shared enterprise that likewise discourage a consumerist or entertainment-based attitude. These principles suggest the degree to which the festival itself is conceived as a manifestly public construction *of and by* the participants.

The other principles of “radical self-expression,” “participation,” and “immediacy” are helpful in understanding the setting in which art installations operate at Burning Man. Even in their most loosely understood (or enacted) form, these principles transform the relationship between art and the public. “Interactivity” as such is not necessarily a quality or aspect of the art itself; it becomes an unpredictable, fluid, and potentially reciprocal condition that is inherent in the context. This is the basis for the site-specificity of the KTM.

In our experience, which ranges from nine to five years of attendance at the festival, the KTM is distinct as an art installation in the way that media are mixed to allow the sound to dominate. In publications, the art at the festival is generally documented visually, though the growth in internet-based videos is probably a better way to get an understanding of the variety of work that is installed there.² Visuality is without question the dominant paradigm, but for the most part the traditional terms of single media do not apply. Fire art – from sculptures that are burned to flame-throwing installations – is a good example of how the context confounds easy categorization. These installations can produce not only dramatic visual effects, but compelling aural, tactile, and olfactory effects as well. Many of the visually psychedelic light installations

have a sound component, and many of the interactive sculptures effectively function as large musical instruments. The KTM is perhaps rather single-minded in this regard. The space created by the booth is small and can hold no more than two people. It is the antithesis to the “natural” space of the desert. The visual components of the installation are likewise not designed to “enhance” the sound, but rather, to create the illusion of interactivity.

3. Why a KTM?

One of the less often-cited motivations for the creation of John Cage’s seminal silent work, *4’33’’*, was that, upon his viewing of Robert Rauschenberg’s “White Paintings” of 1951, he was quoted to have said “Oh yes, I must; otherwise I’m lagging, otherwise music is lagging.”³ This particular motivation is interesting to contemplate given the more traditional discussion of the spiritual motivations relating to his introduction to Zen Buddhism, chance techniques, and the philosophical orientation of non-intentional sound we associate with him. Not that his inspirational experience of the Rauschenberg should negate these other motivations, which are probably just as relevant; but what this illustrates is that Cage was part of a community of artists and thinkers in New York who experienced each other’s work, and was inspired to contribute to the discourse it engendered. Any artist or musician attending a gallery exhibition or performance that has this kind of impact is familiar with the feeling of “Oh wow! Maybe I could...”

The Burning Man Festival as a site for experiencing artwork is a particularly interesting place, due to its transitory and participatory nature, and the KTM was certainly partially conceived of in that spirit. But more than just dreaming of an artwork, the various artists who have contributed to this work have conceived of the KTM as not only an artwork to be experienced on the playa, but as service, a destination, a critical *piece* of the city’s infrastructure, like a good coffee shop, transit system, place of work or, indeed, an ATM. It was in this spirit that the KTM was conceived, and through this process has been refined and modified over the four years of its existence.

Thus, the nature of interactivity in the KTM is in its relationship to the community, its conception as something the community might *need*, as well as the more traditional interactive components of the interface. This interface is a single large button, but also consists of controls that have no real purpose beyond whatever experiences they may generate for the user. The sounds themselves are quite varied in their content, and they exist within the larger soundscape of the event, which create their own unique juxtapositions. The KTM is also positioned on the street frontage of our camp, adjacent to a shade-structure “lobby/chapel” that can serve as a site for public interaction. The lobby/chapel is clearly related to the KTM, but our installation confounds any direct spatial relationship between them. This creates the potential for an intermittent and conditional theatrical component of the experience, in which members of our “board of directors” may or may not be present to observe and respond to users of the KTM.

In fact, the KTM’s connection to our larger theme camp – The First Transdimensional Bank and Church – is an important aspect of its existence. We often have direct interactions with visitors to the KTM, and this has contributed a great deal to the general discourse about the art of the event, to our role in it as both artists and

citizens, and to our connection to fellow event participants. This is one of the unique aspects of the Burning Man event; it is an extremely effective place to exhibit interactive art, due to the mandate of participation that exists as part of the ten principles. Experiences for KTM users vary widely, from confusion, to serenity, to disappointment, to outright rage. “My balance is horrible” one user complained to one of us this year, to which we responded: “I’m sorry to hear that! Maybe you should check it again tomorrow?” This personal interaction is a unique aspect of the experience of the piece on the playa. The fluid nature of the event even makes it possible for passers-by to masquerade as part of the artistic team responsible for the installation. We welcome this sort of performance – even if we do not witness it – as a potential critique of the conventions of interactivity through imposture.

The physical construction of the KTM itself is also a physical critique of norms of public safety. The components of the Jacob’s ladder, which generate a deadly high voltage, are within easy reach and protected only by a thin piece of fabric and an unlit sign warning users not to touch it. This, along with the permeability of the booth to ambient sound and the unscripted and unscheduled performativity, are qualities of the work that make it by definition unsuitable for public exhibition anywhere else. In the terms of gallery, museum, or even street art, it is unshowable. The Burner community that comprises the real core of the context is passionate about making individual interactions and involvement with the work, art, performances, people, and experiences explicit and variable. This creates a discourse that we consider counterpublic. Our goal has been to create a work that confounds the terms of authority, authorship, and even interactivity. Unlike traditional interactive art, which operates through a technically mediated input/output model, the KTM provides only a switch, a trigger.

In more specific terms, the metaphor of the ATM machine as a place where one goes to manage finances, enabling one to function in the market economy, seemed like a fun and interesting focus at an event that is explicitly non-commercial. The metaphor of karma as a unit of capital also seemed quite apt, particularly given the prevalence of Buddhist/New Age-influenced spiritual and philosophical memes among many participants.⁴ Our decision to let the KTM function as a “balance-only” facility—no deposits or withdrawals—allows us to leverage the metaphor without having to make overt references to exactly what karma represents; to leave it to the participant to decide what purpose the KTM experience should serve. It can be satirical while still being a meaningful experience.

4. The Sounds of the KTM

The primary content of the KTM consist of the 104 audio tracks that serve as the main delivery vehicle for expressing one’s “karmic balance.” These have increased in number over the years and represent a huge variety of sonic experiences. The sounds range from field recordings like dripping water and buzzing bees, to drones and noises, to short musical compositions and more. Some are silly, some are scary and disturbing, some are confusing, some are beautiful, and many are highly ambiguous in their role as responses to karmic balance inquiries. The volume on the system is set high enough for the sound to fill the space, but depending on the track it can either briefly overwhelm or subtly blend into the ambient sound of the environment. Their duration is designed to be

long enough to allow the listener to sink into a sense of immersion, temporarily altering their sense of time and space, but not long enough to foster boredom, the sense of an undesirably long commitment, or even the sense of having heard a self-contained composition. Combined with the light display inside the booth, the KTM sounds create what can be experienced as a personalized reading, akin to a tarot or tea-leaf reading, delivered in semi-private, that portends information of an oracular nature.

That the sounds purposefully avoid clichés that are easily interpretable as “good” or “bad” is crucial. Even as the “setup” to the KTM experience is, on its surface, parodic and rooted in social commentary, its “delivery” purposefully moves past meeting the expectations of this setup, inviting the participant to confront and interpret a set of sounds that may have any number of cultural or personal resonances for them. It is at the moment of the delivery of the sound material, then, that the dual function of the KTM is revealed: on the one hand, the KTM embodies an experience that is easily read as a parodic play on capitalist culture (as a form of ATM), on privacy, and on aesthetic coherence. At the same time, the Burning Man-style idealism folds back (without disappearing) to reveal an opportunity, even a demand, for earnest engagement and reflection. This experience, too, is vulnerable to parody through the generic “spirituality” proffered by the installation, but in a way that leaves the possibility for a genuine, unironic connection no less available.

As noted earlier, this is a risky bait-and-switch maneuver, and it is far from universally successful. But nowhere but Burning Man would the KTM have access to an audience so largely prepared and willing to follow it through this metamorphosis and locate themselves within the resulting experience. The KTM calls out to its counter-public not by modeling any of the ten principles of the event, but by inducing some of them. Interactivity as such is brought to a very tight minimum, but the experience is redolent with auditory immediacy and a sense of participation in something. The KTM gifts, but it does so in an emphatically immaterial way. The experience stops abruptly: the user is left to be radically self-reliant.

5. The Man Burns in 364 Days

At the conclusion of the event—the day after the man burns—the KTM, and our entire camp, comes down, along with the rest of Black Rock City. Some art is literally burned to the ground along with the man, some art is gifted, and some, like ours, gets packed away in dusty storage units in Reno, waiting to return to the playa the next year. During the course of the year that follows, plans are made for the next event, and the KTM becomes part of a larger conversation about how our camp will evolve in various ways. This spirit of revision allows us to continue the discourse that the event inspires, as seasoned and new members of our team contribute new ideas and concepts based on the work we do in the default world. As an art collective, the KTM, as well as our larger theme camp, becomes a site of commentary on our experiences, triumphs, and failures over the course of the year, which further solidifies its position as a kind of metaphorical, spiritual “home.” Indeed, as the Burner community arrives on the playa at the beginning of the event each year, greeters hail each participant with the traditional “welcome home!” While this salutation is perhaps somewhat satirical and certainly sentimental, it

is generally quite seriously regarded by returning participants, and reflects the counterpublic tendencies we have been arguing that the event represents.

The KTM is an art piece that encompasses mostly sound, but also theater, installation, and visual art, as well as satire, conceptual art, and social commentary. While the KTM creates opportunities for experiences of meaningful synchronicity, it also interrogates its context by making references to Burning Man's cultural memes without claiming to represent them directly. Users are allowed to engage with the KTM on either level, finding their own meaning in the experience. We hope that as the KTM continues to evolve, along with our larger theme camp, that it can continue to serve as an integral constituent of the event, as well as a site for continued exploration and dialogue.

Notes

¹ See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", *Social Text* (Duke University Press, 1990) 25 (26): 56–80, and Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*. (New York: Zone Books, 2002). Nancy Fraser coined the term *counterpublic* as a way of identifying groups who may be excluded from the general public sphere, but have formed their own public spheres through shared discourse. Michael Warner has expanded significantly upon this concept.

² See, for instance, Jessica Bruder, *Burning Book: A Visual History of Burning Man* (Simon & Schuster, 2007), A. Leo Nash, *Burning Man: Art in the Desert* (Harry N. Abrams, 2007), and Barbara Traub, *Desert to Dream: A Dozen Years of Burning Man Photography* (Immedium, 2011). The journal *Leonardo* (vol. 36, no. 5, 2003) also devoted a special issue to the fire art of Burning Man, with an introduction and helpful overview of the art by Louis M. Brill. The text is available at: http://leonardo.info/gallery/burningman_fire/burningman.html

³ John Cage, Roger Shattuck, and Alan Gillmor, "Erik Satie: A Conversation," *Contact: A Journal of Contemporary Music* no 25 (Autumn 1982): 22.

⁴ See Lee Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* (University of California Press, 2010).