

Oil's Well that Ends Well: A *Crude Awakening* for Western Civilization

by [Matthew A. Taylor](#)

While numerous art installations explored the [Green Man theme](#) at [Burning Man](#) 2007, one piece proved to be the emotional and experiential epicenter of the festival: [Crude Awakening](#), [Karen Cusolito and Dan Das Mann](#)'s homage to the coming downfall of the U.S. Empire and fossil-fueled civilization in general. Crude Awakening was a performance in three acts: construction, destruction, and rebirth. ([Click for a video](#) of the first two acts – *Current TV* neglected to document the third act.)

In the first act, the artists erected a 90-foot-tall oil derrick that dominated the playa's southern skyline. Nine metallic human figures surrounded the derrick, each captured in various poses of worship. For instance, Manu sat in a Buddhist-like lotus position, meditating with his eyes on the revered oil derrick. Down on her knees, Neela assumed a quintessential Christian pose. The nine figures represented a cross-section of cultures and religions from around the world, all united by one thing: their devotion to fossil fuels and the concordant materialism and unsustainable way of life.

Cusolito said, "The piece addresses the end of the oil economy – it will eventually be gone. What happens next? Are you prepared? What will the planet be like after that?"

At night, burners could interact with the worshippers and push buttons that blasted powerful fire effects – for instance, Ecstasy's chakras could be set ablaze as if she was exploding from within, and the pages of Schlomo's holy book could be turned by an operable flamethrower.

For the second act, on Saturday night after the traditional burning of the Man, the Crude Awakening team unleashed a mind-bogglingly complex audiopyrotechnic show. It began with a 180-decibel, 1957 vintage nuclear air raid siren blast to warn playa inhabitants of the impending inferno.

Next, millions of cubic feet of (non-toxic) smoke gushed forth, complemented by a [twisted soundtrack](#) entitled *José*, as in, *José, Can You See?* (Click to [listen to José](#) while you read this story). The musical score kicked off with the familiar uplifting strains of the "Star-Spangled Banner," which soon melted into a minor key melody of anger and anguish. This

gave way to an unbearably long, pounding military march punctuated by relentless red, white, and blue fireworks. Soon, the fireworks turned pure red – the color of carnage and conquest.

The military march was accentuated by heavy metal guitar riffs, invoking scenes from *Fahrenheit 9/11* in which U.S. soldiers rock out while incinerating the people of Iraq. “We want people to feel a little nauseous. We want them to think of oil and blood in the same sentence,” commented Cusolito.

The musical score alluded to many of the U.S. Empire’s lowlights: from genocide and slavery to Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Vietnam. “When Karen and Dan originally asked me to do this, they wanted it to be so depressing that people would want to leave Burning Man,” said composer Gibbon.

The soundtrack then warped into a cacophony of sounds to invoke the cultural and religious elements of the worshippers, such as a Hallelujah chorus and a Muslim call to prayers. “Being at war over God has become a habit, and I really fucking hate that,” commented Gibbon.

Perhaps the only uplifting and inspiring moments of the musical score were found in the faint manifestations of Native American and Australian Aboriginal music fluttering on the edges. Cusolito reflected: “What if when the evil greedy white man came to America, instead of enforcing our way upon the land here, we adopted the customs and traditions of the people who had already been living here harmoniously? What would this world look like?”

Crude Awakening sculptor Emily Appelbaum contemplated, “This is almost a direct response to [what began in 1492], almost a complete turnaround since 1492 in terms of being self-aware.”

Finally, the anthem circled back to the concluding notes of the “Star-Spangled Banner,” this time in a sad, off-key note. The spectacle [climaxed](#) with the ignition of 2,000 gallons of propane and 900 gallons of jet fuel, which shot a thousand-foot-tall fireball in the shape of an atomic mushroom cloud directly up and through the center of the oil derrick, burning it to the ground.

Cusolito and Das Mann claimed that, where possible, they made efforts to “green” the art installation: the majority of the metal was made from recycled materials, the wood sustainably harvested, and the jet fuel was reclaimed from NASA. In addition, the team purchased carbon offsets.

Isn't such an enormous expenditure of fuel not particularly... well... green? Cusolito enthusiastically explained: "The amount of energy [we're using to put on] the big show is equivalent to the amount of energy consumed in the Bay Area in one minute – 2.4 gigawatts of power. So as a matter of scale, to get people to become aware of the size of the footprint they're leaving behind on the planet, to be able to see that much power at one time is really quite humbling and embarrassing."

Das Mann adds, "For us, the idea of Green Man isn't to just come and try to pretend like you're an environmentally conscious person, but to create a dialogue about this entire idea of environmental consciousness [and] energy."

While some burners lauded Das Mann and Cusolito's grand statement, and others didn't seem to "get it," more than a few burners "got it" - and hated it anyway.

"I was offended by [Crude Awakening] because it didn't prove a point, it made an obscene mess. They could have used that whole piece to showcase community building by the participants breaking down that huge bundle of 2x4s and donating it to Burners Without Borders," said Green theme volunteer coordinator Kachina Katrina Zavalney.

Sunday morning, Das Mann and Cusolito unveiled the carefully guarded secret third and final act of the performance: a 50-foot living redwood tree, intended to replace the oil derrick as the object being prayed to by the looming figures. The artists intended to position the tree such that it would appear to arise from the ashes of the charred and fallen oil derrick. The redwood was grown in a box at a nursery and trucked out from the Bay Area.

"That's our optimistic answer to what happens next: we return to worshipping nature and nurturing nature to allow her to sustain us," said Cusolito on the eve of the third act. "Whether or not Mother Nature has any intention of sustaining us again... It might already be out of our hands.... Hopefully she'll forgive all our stupidity and our ill-will."

Burner Bob Borretto of Ann Arbor, Michigan contemplated, "It's going to take a huge social transformation to go from worshipping corporate multinationals to worshipping nature."

The redwood was to symbolize and inspire the transition, but the final act was never completed. Burning Man art director Crimson ordered the tree evicted from the playa because, according to art curator Lady Bee's officious statement at the scene, the tree was a violation of the festival's no-plants policy and an enormous MOOP (matter out of place) liability.

Das Mann claims he received permission from Burning Man founder and president Larry Harvey, but Lady Bee claims that Das Mann had been informed several days earlier that the tree was nixed. Das Mann disagrees: "I wouldn't have brought that [tree] in if someone had said, 'Dan, you can't bring that [tree] in.' No one did that," Das Mann told the federal Bureau of Land Management authorities.

Faced with threats of trespassing charges and revocation of a \$10,000 performance bond, Das Mann sent the tree home. Her final abode will be the couple's Oakland warehouse, where she will add a little green to an ecosystem of fire, welding, and heavy metal.

"I come out here to interact with people in a good, honest, and conscious way, and...to bring the law into it -- this is unbelievable.... At the very heart of it, we had some miscommunications. Communication is the great struggle of humanity," said Das Mann.

After journeying as far as the inner circle of Crude Awakening, the redwood never made it off the truck's flatbed. Nevertheless, a few dozen curious burners approached the prone, majestic being, a source of wonder and confusion for those just awakening from a long, dark night of frenetic resource-intense partying.

Several burners took shade and comfort amidst the tree's branches during the scant hours before she was trucked off the scene. When someone speculated that the tree might be destined for the fate of the oil derrick, one burner remarked, "That would be awesome. I like seeing shit burn. It's fun, and it's a big tree."

Other burners viewed the redwood with unabashed reverence. "If they burn the tree, they'll have to burn me with it," commented one outspoken journalist. Jamielle from Los Angeles was relieved to hear the tree was headed back to Oakland. "All this worship of greed, now let them come worship a living tree, which represents unity, life."

Contemplating the significance of the eviction, Crude Awakening sculptor Kevin Deetz observed, “The largest living organism on this playa in the last 10,000 years was just escorted off the premises.”

Appelbaum added, “The tree speaks really strongly to revitalizing a barren landscape. And if we’re not careful, our entire planet’s going to look like *this* [the Black Rock Desert].”

Confronted with a real-life, physical manifestation of the natural world, the Green Man’s bureaucracy rejected that which it had proposed to glorify. Burning Man was over – for 2007, and perhaps forever.

“Burning Man was this really offbeat great independent thing that got bigger and bigger and more popular, and it needed its own bureaucratic system, and that system has sent our tree out the door. The moment the system interferes with the original purpose of the movement, it’s over.... Maybe everyone who saw this will be newly stimulated to challenge bureaucracy, to challenge authority, to make the most potent statement they can to express themselves,” added Appelbaum.

If the redwood tree could voice her feelings, what would she say?

Speaking on behalf of the tree, Appelbaum said sympathetically: “You weren’t ready for me yet, but I understand.”

Perhaps India’s spiritual leader [Mahatma Gandhi](#) deserves the last word. Ninety-one years ago, he had the temerity to call a spade a spade in his thorough indictment of Western Civilization and call to local self-rule, [Hind Swaraj](#):

“This civilization is such that one has only to be patient and it will be self-destroyed. According to the teaching of Mahommed this would be considered a Satanic Civilization. Hinduism calls it the Black Age. I cannot give you an adequate conception of it. It is eating into the vitals of the English nation. It must be shunned. Parliaments are really emblems of slavery. If you will sufficiently think over this, you will entertain the same opinion and cease to blame the English. They rather deserve our sympathy. They are a shrewd nation and I therefore believe that they will cast off the evil. They are enterprising and industrious and their mode of thought is not inherently immoral. Neither are they bad at heart. I therefore respect them. Civilization is not an incurable disease, but it should never be forgotten that the English people are at present afflicted by it.”

Links

[Current TV video: Crude Awakening Construction \(extended\)](#)

[Current TV video: Crude Awakening Burns](#)

[SFGate.com video: The Revered Oil Derrick burns](#)

[audio: José, Can You See? \(the melting national anthem\)](#)

[Crude Awakening .pdf](#)

Cusolito and Das Mann's art installation The Passage can be viewed in San Francisco's Embarcadero next to the Ferry Building.

About the author: Matthew A. Taylor believes we should listen to the voices of the tree people.