The Impact of Immersion:

A Case Study of Burning Man and its

Implications for Audience Engagement

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"Stay seated. Be quiet. Face front. Wait for intermission." The ritual ingrained surrounding attending arts performances is harsh, distancing audience members from the creative action and stifling interaction. It's no wonder people feel disconnected when the fourth wall is thick, opting instead for more participatory options like interactive theatre, arenas, and nightclubs (Conner 2008, 103), or experiential arts festivals like Burning Man, which has become so popular that it sells out annually upon distributing its 70,000 tickets. Not only do these alternative options offer more freedom and interaction – and therefore a more personal experience – but also frequently cultivate a sense of communal belonging framed by art.

In a 2011 report about the critical need for arts to be experiential, Creative New Zealand emphatically warns artists and organizations to adapt higher levels of personalization and interactivity if they wish to remain relevant (7). If we believe that the arts are to be valued for their role propelling critical thinking, civic engagement, economic growth, place making, and/or building community, we must seek out engaging audience models. In teaching our audiences that their place is opposite the performance, we launched a snowball down the hill of inevitable disengagement.

Thus, it's a small jump to make that if we value arts engagement, we must transform our audiences from spectators to participants. The growing trend of immersive performance does just that. And yet the term "immersive" is currently more a buzzword than a reliable descriptor, applied liberally and without scrutiny; lacking both criteria and terminology. This paper aims to fill that void by offering vocabulary and proposing six criteria that make a performance immersive. It also explores audience engagement implications, turning to Burning Man as a bright spot case study for its highly engaging practices that have deepened and broadened its audiences, attracting and retaining a loyal following.

From an audience engagement standpoint, the performing arts have much to learn from the art and community festival, which nineteen-year Burning Man artist Maque DaVis calls "the greatest arts city in the world – the Brigadoon of interactive art and immersion."[1] Held annually in Black Rock Desert, Nevada, the festival aims to "blend life and art so you can't tell the difference" (Collier 2001). Rising out of the countercultural tides of San Francisco in the mid 1980s, Burning Man adheres to guiding principles including participation, communal effort, radical self-expression, immediacy, civic responsibility, and inclusivity (The 10 Principles of Burning Man 2017). These are pervasive values in artistic and social interaction during and beyond the festival, and they illuminate Burning Man's immersive framework. This framework has led to hugely successful audience engagement, and therefore

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[1] Interview with author, May 13, 2016.

audience growth. Notably, Burning Man's success growing its audiences took off in the 1990s when interest in experiences expanded in Western thought and culture. Unsurprisingly, immersive theatre also caught hold in Europe and the United States during this decade.
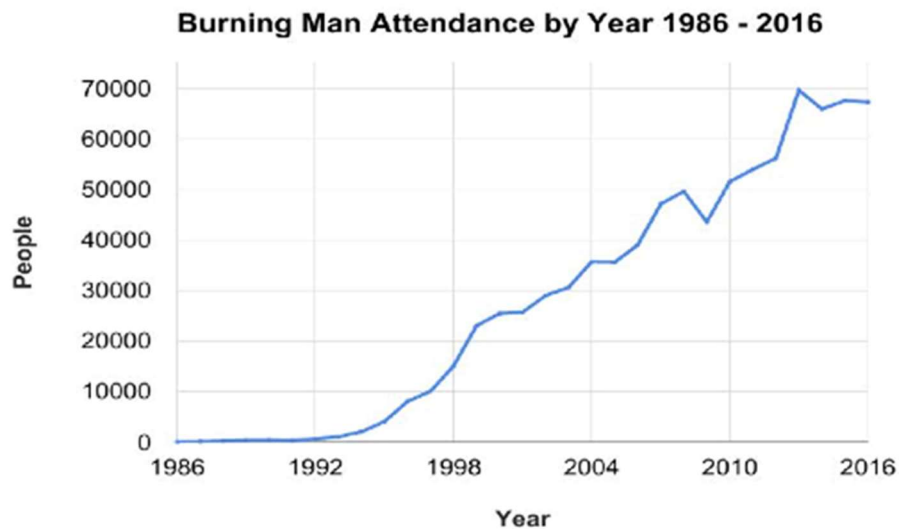
Burning Man attendance, 1986 – 2016. Table by Stephanie Reisfeld Shafer. Sources: Burning Man Timeline 2017.

The festival retains a robust community year-round on a global scale, with over 64% of members involved in events during the offseason (Heller, Beaulieu-Prévost, DeVaul, McRae, & the 2015 Census Lab 2016). There are over 1,181,000 followers on its official Facebook page (not to mention the countless unofficial groups), over 115,000 following the official Twitter account, and over 368,000 on its official Instagram as of writing. New interest within this already robust community continues to grow. On these same pages in the year researching for this paper, followers increased by 10% on Facebook, by nearly 13% on Twitter, and by a staggering 113% on Instagram.

The growing attention online reflects participant reports of interest in the festival. 51.6% of Burning Man attendees – called burners – call it a transformative experience, leading to loyalty and audience retention. In 2016, 60.7% were returners, and 94.4% of census respondents report intending to return in the future (DeVaul, Beaulieu-Prévost, Heller, & the 2016 Census Lab 2017). When art engages personally and in meaningful ways, audience members undergo transformative experiences and build loyalties. As creative professionals striving to make positive impact through the arts, we should investigate the applications of Burning Man's engagement practices in our own organizations.

Deepening, broadening, and diversifying audiences are goals of any savvy arts organization. Currently, many seek to diversify their audiences by attracting more young people and people of color. One of the limitations of this case study is that Burning Man continues to attract a primarily white, young audience, with financial means great enough to take a week off work to attend. In 2016, burners who identify as white made up 79.1% of the population. From 2013 to 2016, the median ages were thirty three and thirty four, while the most common income range (before taxes) was $50,000 - $99,000 (DeVaul, Beaulieu-Prévost, Heller, & the 2016 Census Lab 2017). To be clear, this paper does not make the case that immersive practices will diversify audiences. Rather, it assesses the engagement potential of immersive performance in our current economy, codifies successful techniques, and presents criteria, with hopes that this research may help provide a new framework for further investigation.

So what are the criteria of immersive performance? What do these criteria look like, and what should we call them? What are the implications for audience engagement? To answer these questions, this paper builds on existing literature about immersive performance and presents original qualitative research highlighting Burning Man as a bright spot case study. Methods include ethnographic interviews with immersive artists and participants; observation at immersive performances and at Burning Man in 2007, 2011, 2013, and 2015; participation as performer in an immersive performance; and literature review.

Context

The Era of the Experience Economy

Audiences must transform from spectators to participants to combat disengagement. Luckily, the time is ripe for an experiential revolution, as we are in an era economists call the "experience economy" (Pine & Gilmore 1999; Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson 2012; Kosolcharoen 2014; Lindinger et al. 2013; Poulsson & Kale 2004). In this economy, experiences are valued over goods and services, and the more experiential an event becomes, the better. What does this mean for the arts? Consider, for example, a classic performance of *Macbeth* in a proscenium theatre. As an audience member, one can expect to arrive at the theatre, visit the box office, then mingle in the lobby until directed by ushers to an assigned seat. Upon sitting, audience members wait for the lights to dim and the curtain to open. They quietly watch the show in the dark until intermission, when any artistic world they've been brought into vanishes for twenty minutes, to abruptly resume again with the same expected behavior. Though in the experience economy this show likely qualifies as an experience rather than a service (it's certainly not a good), there is infinite room to make it more interactive, more personal, more engaging.

Now consider *Sleep No More,* the production of *Macbeth* in New York City that has run continuously since 2011. In this *Macbeth*, the story unfolds in many rooms simultaneously in an old hotel. Upon arriving at the fictitious, meticulously themed McKittrick Hotel, audience members are welcomed into 1939 Scotland. Coats and cell

phones are taken and attendees are led down a dim and twisting hallway by a character. Emerging through heavy curtains into a smoky red velvet lounge, audience members are given masks, a few ground rules, and are set out to explore the building and experience the performance. They view the story from where they wish, often in non-linear form. They interact with characters and the set. Creative action is all around for discovery and no visit is the same.

In the experience economy – labeled by some as the Age of Participation, the Engagement Economy (Lindinger et al. 2013), and the Age of the Prosumer (Ritzer et al. 2012) – *Sleep No More* is more valuable than the classic *Macbeth* performance. Bowditch would argue this is because it becomes individualized (2010, 105). Pine and Gilmore claim being memorable is crucial (1999, 10-11). Creative New Zealand would make the case for the production's value because it is interactive (2011). Authors like Ritzer et al. (2012), Chen (2011), and Bruns (2008) would appreciate how its participants become prosumers, simultaneously consuming and producing their experience and thus encouraging a sense of ownership and buy-in. I will assert that such productions are valued because they are immersive, and therefore highly engaging.

Immersion and Flow

Data collected for this paper suggests that immersive performances have two nonnegotiable criteria, further strengthened by four more. First, audience members must be free to view and experience the creative action from where they wish, rather than from an assigned seat. I call this agency of viewpoint. Agency of viewpoint is more engaging than the assigned viewpoint of a predetermined seat because it empowers audience members to seek out personalized experiences at performances. With near infinite viewing possibilities, an immersive performance becomes all encompassing. One simply cannot see or interact with everything. Authors Kirby and Dine call this a "total experience" (1965).

Second, a performance must be interactive before it can be immersive. Audience members become participants, co-creating an environment with performers. These participants take on active roles that affect both their and other attendees' experiences and the creative action. Therefore immersive performances, by nature, will be different each time.

If these two main criteria are met successfully, an immersive experience can be so compelling that it encourages a state of flow – what Csikszentmihalyi (1997) defines as a condition of complete presence, where sense of time and self disappear. In everyday speak, we call finding flow being "in the groove," "in the zone," or reflecting that everything else "just disappears." We often find it at play, and always when we are highly tuned-in to our activity. Csikszentmihalyi's studies reveal that flow is rarely experienced during passive activities. Rather, an experience must strike a balance between skill and challenge, which is why immersive performance evokes flow better than does traditional performance. When achieved, flow is an "intrinsically enjoyable" (Jackson & Marsh 1996, 17; Privette 1983, 1361) and often playful state (Costello 2007). Bowditch calls flashes of flow at arts performances

"utopian performatives," or "profound moments that occur during a performance when the audience is lifted out of and above everyday life and experiences the emotionally charged sensation of a better world" (2010, 79). Flow is the ultimate engagement state, and therefore our ears should perk up as arts leaders interested in serving and growing our audiences.

A positive immersive experience is highly engaging, prompting desire for more. After all, there is always more to explore in a total experience, and more to be felt in the junction of pleasure and presence. Helping our audiences find flow can enable transformative experiences, leading to opportunities to deepen relationships with a loyal audience base. With a long enough run, this base will return with others, broadening our circles.[2] Audience deepening and broadening are exactly what we see in the Burning Man attendance by year table above, coinciding with the boom of the experience economy and the desire for personalization that is rampant today.

A Developing Vocabulary

If arts leaders want to explore the audience engagement potential of immersive performance, we need to be able to discuss it. Yet we still lack a solidified vocabulary. Scott, Hinton-Smith, Harma, and Broome (2013) and Edmonds (2010, 2011) discuss "interactive art" in their research, though largely descriptive of visual art. Morreale and De Angeli (2015) hop on the "interactive art" train as well, as applied to music. Lindinger et al. (2013) and Her (2014) refer to "interactive installations," while Loke, Khut, and Kocaballi (2012) label the genre "participatory live-art installation." Still, Holmer, DiSalvo, Sengers, and Lodato (2015) prefer the term "participatory arts." Notably, while it is clear these authors describe similar interactive and nontraditional performance models, none offers criteria for what makes the artistic event immersive.

The label "immersive" weaves through literature as well, largely connected to the experience economy. Burning Man founder Larry Harvey calls the festival an "immersive environment" (Bowditch 2010, 105), as do Sheppard et al. (2008) about those they've created for dance. Slade describes *Sleep No More* as "immersive theatre" (2014), based on its parent company Punchdrunk's pioneering of the term (White 2013, 16). I have chosen the term immersive performance as an inclusive term (i.e. not only about theatre) to distinguish the immersive and performative aspects of an artistic event while nodding to its experiential nature. This paper will both use existing vocabulary and introduce new terms to guide arts leaders towards linguistic and conceptual clarity.

Engagement: Who and When?

Of important note for the scope of this paper is its focus on the interactive exchange on-site during performance rather than in the lead-up to the show. Many organizations and artists have begun looping in patrons (often called influencers) to the creation or marketing of a work. This engagement method of "crowd sourcing"

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[2] Interview with author, April 18, 2016

(Brown, Novak-Leonard, & Gillbride 2011) is thought to enable a sense of ownership. While the exchange is participatory, ultimately even an influencer winds up watching the performance passively. Because of this fourth wall, and due to the discontinuity of experience from preparation to production, my research focuses solely on interaction during performance.

Relevant to when and how participation occurs is the audience involvement spectrum Alan Brown et al. present in *Getting in on the Act: How Arts Groups are Creating Opportunities for Active Participation* (2011). The spectrum distinguishes five levels of participants' creative involvement. From receptive to participatory: 1. Spectating; 2. Enhanced engagement; 3. Crowd sourcing; 4. Co-creation; and 5. Audience as artist (16-19). This spectrum provides a useful reference tool for framing this topic, as immersive performances fall into levels four and five: "co-creation" and "audience as artist." These levels are the most active and participatory of the bunch.

A Brief History of Immersive Performance in Western Culture

Ambient, even interactive performance is age-old. Consider medieval court jesters or street performers, for instance. However, that style of performance differs from immersive performance in that it was never intended to be the only point of focus, or to completely immerse its audience in a seamless environment crafted to deeply engage. Shows may be curated, but experiences are facilitated.

Instead, the seed for Western contemporary immersive performance was planted in the 1920s by the surrealists, who "sought to reenchant rationalized life" (Chen 2011, 6). This practice influenced the Dadaists and postmodernists of the 1950s, who questioned what performance meant and where it needed to be housed. In exploration, postmodernists like John Cage and Allan Kaprow created Happenings to "blur art and life" (Bowditch 2010, 156), incorporate chance into performance, and engage audiences beyond the theatre. For example, in Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, visitors were instructed to move from room to room in New York City's Reuben Gallery, observing and interacting with performers who bounced a ball, arranged wooden blocks, squeezed orange juice, and lit matches (Reynolds & McCormick 2003, 394). Happenings blurred the lines between audience members and performers, juxtaposing art and life.

A decade later in the 1960s, Experiments in Arts and Technology (EAT) was born. EAT catalyzed the consideration of technology as an art form, while simultaneously presenting "technology as the means to move forward within aesthetic discourse" (Giannachi 2004, 2). In other words, EAT proponents took a new stance on what technology could do for the arts and how it may be viewed as a creative form itself. Among other applications, Experiments in Art and Technology would later lead to today's obsession with virtual reality. But first, it influenced Human Computer Interaction (HCI).

As computers became more commonplace and integrated with art, technology carved out a stronghold in interactive art and immersive performance. HCI – in this context – is computer-integrated art that "cannot function without active physical participation of audience members" (Loke et al. 2012, 779). It frequently

takes the form of visual art, wherein the spectator takes on the role of performer as they interact (Loke & Khut 2014, 92). For example, a 2009 exhibit at London's Victoria and Albert museum titled "Dandelion" required spectators to blast a hairdryer at a flower on a screen to blow away its petals (Scott et al. 2013, 429). Hundreds of installations and studies explore HCI for participatory engagement (Edmonds et al. 2009; Edmonds 2010, 2011; Benford & Giannachi 2012; Morreale & De Angeli 2015; Reeves et al. 2005; Scott et al. 2013; Willis 2007; Holmer et al. 2015). While the literature on HCI explores possibility between technology in art and collaboration between artists and engineers, it fails to explain what elements make art or performance interactive. Here, again, we find need for establishing criteria.

Combining elements of HCI and analog performance, Benford and Giannachi (2012) describe "mixed reality performance." This immersive experience combines live performance by actors or participants with interactive digital media. An example is a 2009 work by U.K. theatre group Blast Theory. In *Rain, Ulrike, and Eamon Compliant,* participants physically explored a city while receiving cell phone calls describing two fictitious terrorists. Instructions demanded increasing compliance from participants, who were ultimately led to an interrogation room for a one-on-one interaction with an actor in character. Mixed reality performance has become possible with the evolution of technology and its increasingly seamless overlay with analog life. However, it too fails to define its immersive properties or address arts audience engagement implications.

Thus, immersive performance has roots in surrealism, Dadaism, Happenings, postmodernism, and interactive technologies. Contemporary immersive theatre caught hold in London in the 1990s and 2000s. In *Audience Participation in Theatre: Aesthetics of the Invitation*, Gareth White offers a hefty list of examples touring in London at that time: De La Guarda's *Villa Villa* in 1999/2000 and *Fuerzabruta* in 2006; Shunt's *Dance Bear Dance* in 2003 and *Amato Saltone* in 2006; Punchdrunk with *Faust* and *The Masque of the Red Death* in 2005 and 2007; Tim Crouch's *The Audience* in 2009/2010; and Para Active and Zecora Ura's *Hotel Medea* in 2012 (2013, 16). Punchdrunk popularized immersive theatre in the U.S. when it previewed *Sleep No More* at Boston's A.R.T in 2009 after its 2003 London opening. It established its permanent home in New York City in 2011 and has run continuously since.

It should come as no surprise that Pine and Gilmore wrote and published their seminal work introducing the experience economy in the 1990s: the same decade that immersive theatre became popular and the genre gained attention. Twenty years later, Western society is well established in the experience economy. But the arts still haven't polished our niche in it or developed terminology to get there. Let's address that now.

Findings

Criteria of Immersive Performance and Audience Engagement Implications

Data collected for this study point to six criteria that make a performance immersive. These include temporal and spatial zoning, agency of viewpoint, never establishing a fourth wall, continuity of experience, multisensory engagement, and

interactivity. Additionally, a supporting concept that surfaced is the need for social agreements to make audiences comfortable and aware of new norms in immersive environments.
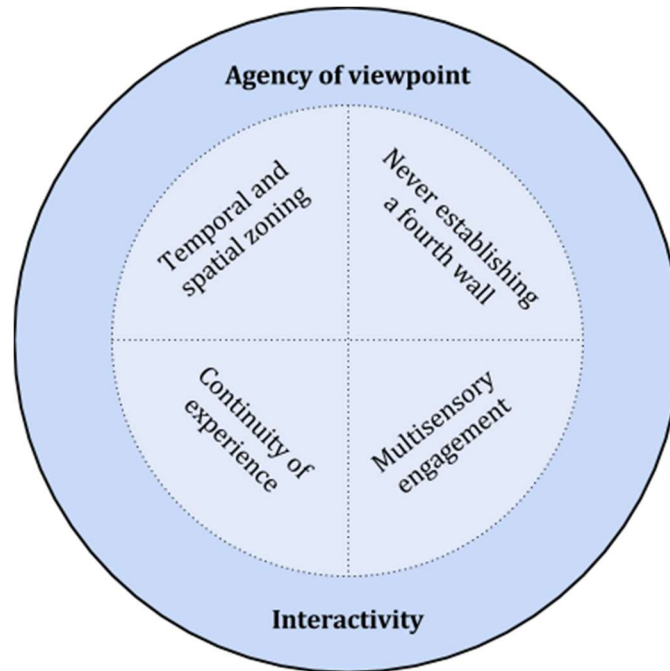
The six criteria of immersive performance. Graphic by Stephanie Reisfeld Shafer, 2017.

Temporal and Spatial Zoning. Before Burning Man left San Francisco for the desert, a related group called The Cacophony Society held "zone trips." These extended adventures took members "outside [their] local area of time and place" (Bowditch 2010, 39) and began by drawing a line on the ground to symbolically designate a "zone gateway" (Gilmore & Van Proyan 2005, 52). This notion of temporal and spatial zoning is relevant to immersive performances today, for without distinguishing a special space in which different norms apply, participants become torn between the norms of two worlds, causing confusion and impeding participation. Passing over or through a gateway visually and experientially cues someone that they have entered a new zone.

Thus, it is a criterion of immersive performance that the experience takes place in a defined place for a set amount of time. By this logic, we can rule out flash mobs as immersive performance. For although a spectator may become surrounded by creative action, and the event happens for a period of time, the spectator remains in the same space with seemingly the same behavioral expectations as before the dancing appeared. Temporal zoning without spatial zoning leaves a spectator confused as to how to participate. What are the norms of this new reality? What are

the boundaries? Instead, stepping into a clearly zoned space emancipates audience members from typical norms. At Burning Man, the space is Black Rock City, which has a physical perimeter defining city limits. The duration is one week.

Yet simply stepping over a line does not set up audiences for comfortable immersion. Rather, ushering participants out of what Burning Man calls their default world and into a new zone requires facilitation. A theme that emerged in artist interviews is the importance of creating a liminal space to orient entry into a new zone. A liminal entry is an intentional area that sets the tone for the creative experience to come. It is neither here nor there – a space and energy that eases participants in to what is ahead.

For example, Burning Man's liminal space is the lead up to entry. This entrance takes hours after exiting the highway and is a physical space: a long stretch of dirt road between the highway and the festival gate. As the Burning Man radio station begins to crackle over the airwaves, attendees are welcomed by endless signposts touting thematic exclamations and reminders about participatory expectations. Cars kick up dust and rumble over desert ground. Erupting flames, the silhouettes of large art installations, and neon festival lights glow in the distance. The faint thud of music carries through the air. Participants pass stations manned by costumed staff and volunteers, including a reception complete with a hug and initiation ritual for first-timers. Once finally at the gate, attendees are given an event program and map and are directed to drive slowly into the streets of Black Rock City to find their campsite. The tone setting is so successfully achieved by this liminal entry that participants have a sense of the new zone's scaffolding by the time they park. By easing attendees in through a liminal space, artists provide cues that different norms apply in this new time and space bound zone.

Agency of Viewpoint. Once in a temporally and spatially zoned environment, a nonnegotiable tenet of immersive performance is agency of viewpoint. An audience member's freedom to decide from where and with what proximity they view the creative action immediately flags their role as active participant rather than passive receiver. In immersive performances, audience members navigate the environment at their own pace and move freely through the total experience, imprinting the feeling that the creative world is endless. There is no assigned seating.

An example is Michelle Ellsworth's *Clytigation*, performed at On the Boards in Seattle, March 2015. In this interactive work, audience members enacted agency of viewpoint as they wandered the black box theatre interacting with gadgets, speaking with characters and other attendees, and even eating waffles. If an audience member picked up the telephone on stage, they could speak with a mysterious character, entirely anonymous but clearly not in the theatre, expanding the performance zone past the immediate setting and creating the illusion that the world was limitless. Burning Man's setting in the ephemeral Black Rock City is also a nod to total experience. The festival is not a single stage, but rather an entire city to explore.

Agency of viewpoint is one of the most important tools for evoking a total experience. Notably for audience engagement and development purposes,

performances that induce total experience reengage, deepening and broadening audiences with a long enough run. Some have returned to *Sleep No More* over 70 times and have found the show so impactful that they have tattoos of the emblem (Slade 2014). At Burning Man, an average 62% are returners (Burning Man Census 2008, 2012, 2015, 2016), and in 2016 47% of them had attended up to seven times (DeVaul et al. 2017). The encouragement to choose from where to experience a performance liberates and empowers audience members. It enables active participation and makes each performance a unique and personal experience.

Never Establishing a Fourth Wall. An understandable misconception about immersive performances is that they break the fourth wall. Rather, audiences must be convinced a fourth wall *never* existed.

At Burning Man, parades are a daily occurrence. However, in contrast with most in the default world, anyone can join at anytime. The entire procession is fluid and inclusive. Burning Man senior staff member $teven Ras$pa calls them "improvised moving theatre experiences."[3] For instance, on TutuTuesday, thousands of burners wear tutus and parade through the streets of Black Rock City. Anyone in a tutu (and really anyone wearing anything at all) can join the celebration. Dozens, if not hundreds of parades take place at Burning Man every year, with no barrier to participation.

Another misconception about immersive performances is the belief that a work becomes immersive if it is site-specific. While these productions sometimes offer agency of viewpoint, they do not necessarily welcome audience members into the performance space to interact with performers. Thus, there is still a fourth wall separating performance and audience areas.

And while the proscenium theatre carries with it a sense of the traditional, these spaces can certainly be used in immersive ways. For example, take *Silk & Knife*, an evening of six Jiri Kylian ballets at the Royal Danish Ballet in October 2007. Audience members filtered into their seats after winding around the cellars of the opera house, encountering dancers in tableaux. A strip of tape on the ground suggested their way through the bowels of the building, across the stage, and ultimately to their seats. Everyone played performer as they crossed the stage in front of their already-seated peers. Though the theatre housed the ballet, it did so immersively.

Sleep No More Special Envoy Cesar Hawas adds that there must be no sense of performer-only space, even when a theatre is used. At his production, "there is no backstage. It is real for all-intensive purposes. You would never see a performer break character or out of costume on the set."[4] Fourth walls divide performer and audience spaces, barring meaningful interaction. As discussed previously, interaction is a nonnegotiable component of immersive performance. Therefore, fourth walls cannot exist.

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[3] Interview with author, May 13, 2016.
[4] Interview with author, April 14, 2016.

Continuity of Experience. Let us recall the classic *Macbeth* performance again. There, an audience's experience of the show happened in a disjointed manner, sandwiched between having tickets taken, rushing to the bathroom at intermission, and being released from the show to exit the theatre. This practice not only reeks of fourth walls and lack of total experience, but also prevents any state of flow due to its abrupt inconsistencies and shallow creative participation.

Thus it was unsurprising that the mandate for continuity of experience emerged as a criterion of immersive performance. Continuity of experience is as it sounds – an unswerving immersion into a creative world from the moment of zone entry until the moment of exit. Experience economy authors Pine and Gilmore refer to this as "theming the experience" (1999, 46-52). Theme perpetuates continuity.

Facilitating continuity of experience need not destroy the logistically and biologically necessary elements of intake, intermission, and exit. For example, *Sleep No More* does not distribute physical tickets, because no one would show up to a hotel with tickets. Instead, attendees show up and check in as if guests.[5] At Burning Man, even a trip to the restroom is themed. In 2015 at the porta potties nearest my camp, a group of burners adopted a stall. They kept it comically clean, fresh with soft tissue and scented with candles, played pleasant music, and stationed a tuxedoed bathroom attendant outside the door to dole out sanitizer and lotion with the utmost of manners. The line between art and life remained blurred even when visiting the porta potties. Now that's continuity of experience.

In discussion about the disjointed nature of most intermissions, Kristen Ramer Liang, Engagement Manager at Pacific Northwest Ballet, offered that an attractor for many patrons is the chance to socialize with friends and family. Intermission affords them that opportunity.[6] She is spot-on, as 76% of adults surveyed for a 2015 National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) study reported "socializing with friends and family" as a motivation for performing arts attendance (Blume-Kohout, Leonard, & Novak-Leonard, 10-12). Similarly, 88.5% of burners in 2015 reported that they considered the Burning Man community a family (Heller et al. 2016).

These social desires can still be met with continuity of experience preserved. At Seattle Immersive Theatre's February 2016 production of *Romeo and Juliet,* intermission took place on set at the Capulet Ball. Audience members were encouraged to dance, mingle, eat, and drink while socializing with friends or with characters. Or take the organization's production of *The Place Between* in May 2016. As the production was set in limbo between life and death, the bar served themed drinks like a "corpse reviver" to keep offerings cohesive with artistic content.

Continuity of experience echoes the Dadaist notion of blurring art and life and is central to developing an immersive performance that engages through flow. It need not overturn elements designed to give artists and audiences a biological, logistical,

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[5] Cesar Hawas, interview with author, April 14, 2016.
[6] Interview with author, March 17, 2016.

or social break. Rather, continuity of experience keeps an immersive zone charged with a certain magic that can enable transcendent experiences and utopian performatives.

Multisensory Engagement. As highlighted by the "corpse reviver" cocktail, thematic multisensory engagement is useful for facilitating immersion. Taste is often utilized to engage, with alcohol a frequent offering at immersive performances due to its participation-enabling effects. At Burning Man, alcohol and other mood-altering substances are also commonly brought by participants.

Yet multisensory engagement does not only take the form of food or drink. Eight-year Burning Man installation artist Cameron Mason reflects, "The idea of installation is to evoke feelings, ideas, and a physicality to the interactive response. It's inherent that there's a sensory response."[7] In discussion about multisensory art at Burning Man, five-year burner Arielle Cohen described her attraction to "The Desert Forest" in 2012/2013. This 8,000 square foot installation (The Desert Forest, n.d.) gave burners reprieve from the harsh desert as they were welcomed to lie on faux fur carpet beneath thousands of suspended strips of plastic. Instrumental music and softly shifting lighting added a subtle layer to the largely tactile experience. In addition to the brushing of the plastic, Cohen recalled "the sound of the flaps in the wind. The movement in the wind was engaging, and the way the strips parted to reveal other people around you. The people engaging with the art piece then became part of the art too."[8] The opportunity to stimulate multiple senses is important in immersive performance. It offers a dimensional and interactive entry into the art.

Multisensory engagement in "The Desert Forest," Burning Man 2013. Photos by Stephanie Reisfeld Shafer.

Interactivity. Interactivity is a nonnegotiable criterion of immersive performance. For the purpose of this research, I define interactivity as a co-creative and influential exchange on-site, during performance. By this definition, art is interactive when it necessitates audience response for activation or completion.

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[7] Interview with author, May 5, 2016.
[8] Interview with author, May 16, 2016.

Mimicry and call and response surfaced as the most common ways to achieve interactivity in immersive performance.

Mimicry is one of Caillois and Barash's (1961) four forms of play. It often takes the form of dressing up and "produces a sensation of freedom, a suspension of ordinary reality in favour of a separate play reality" (Bowditch 2010, 142). Mimicry at Burning Man is one way attendees practice the event's principles of radical self-expression and participation. Burners interact with the creative environment by wearing whatever feels authentically, celebratedly, themselves: body paint, lights, animal suits, jewelry, wings, or even nothing at all. For burners who didn't get the memo to dress up, there are giveaways. At a camp called Kostume Kult, visitors can dig through boxes of eccentric clothes, pick something, show it off on the runway, and keep it. Camp founder Jim Glaser (aka Kostume Jim) feels that helping someone find a costume is an "empowering ritual" with "great potential for transformation" (Bowditch 2010, 145). Burners also sometimes practice mimicry by taking on a new name for the week, called a playa name. Engaging through mimicry creates space to explore a new sense of self while co-creating a themed environment.

Mimicry is also common at immersive performances. Masks and costumes are frequently offered to audience members, emancipating them from their everyday attire and identity while signaling entry into a new zone.

Interaction through mimicry at Burning Man 2007, 2015. Photos by Stephanie Reisfeld Shafer.

Call and response is another method that enables interaction. Despite the name, it need not be verbal. Instead, interactive art elicits a participant's action, provoking a response. The question, "how will this piece be interactive?" is asked on all Burning Man art grant applications.[9] Much of the art there only works when a participant or group acts on it. Peter Hudson's large-scale kinetic zoetrope installations offer a fantastic example. In 2011, his work "Charon" required a group of participants to pull a series of ropes to activate the piece. With the physical instigation, a massive wheel studded with skeletons began to spin, setting off a strobe light. An optical illusion then took shape, appearing as if a single skeleton were in fact animated. This form of interactive art, which takes activation and collaboration, is central to Burning Man.

Call and response interaction is also widely practiced in immersive performances. Speaking with characters is one way that audience members interact in this manner. Performers thus become facilitators of the immersive experience by eliciting call and response. This point highlights how roles take new shape in immersive performance. The artist or director becomes a catalyst, the performers facilitators, and the spectators participants. The entire experience is a program.

Social Agreements*.* "I have a mixed relationship with the encouragement (pressure?) to interact. I often feel guilty I do not give enough," relays five-time burner, Julia Mergendoller.[10] This sentiment is common amongst immersive arts audiences. While attendees may be inclined towards participation, they often worry they are getting it wrong or lack comfort to engage at their desired levels. As arts leaders interested in the engagement potential of immersive performance, we must thoughtfully help audiences navigate their interaction insecurities.

Establishing social agreements is the first step. Though this practice is not a criterion of immersive performance, it is important for a successful audience experience. These communal contracts facilitate audience comfort, greater sense of control, and awareness of new norms. While some artists prefer to tell participants what they can and cannot do upon entering a performance zone, others prefer to show. For Project Bandaloop's piece *Harboring,* performed at Fort Mason, San Francisco, in July 2013, artistic director Amelia Rudolph welcomed audiences into a liminal space pre-show. There, she listed three ground rules: 1. Attendees could view the work from where they chose; 2. Social media posts were allowed, but only from the back; 3. Shorter people should be let to the front.[11] Rudolph felt that verbally establishing a social agreement best set up her audiences for a successful experience.

Years ago, Seattle immersive choreographer KT Niehoff also facilitated social agreements through spoken ground rules. Now, she prefers to show instead of tell. "With [*A Glimmer of Hope or Skin or Light*], I wanted to get away from patronizing them and just assume that people are smart… That the work could indicate the social

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[9] Cameron Mason, interview with author, May 5, 2016.
[10] Interview with author, May 21, 2016.
[11] Interview with author, April 8, 2016.

contract as opposed to a verbal set of instructions."[12] Niehoff and her dancers thus created methods to communicate the social agreements in the liminal period before the show. She directed her dancers to initiate conversations in character to model interaction and touch people so they would not be surprised later if a dancer needed to move them from a performance space. Niehoff now prefers this non-verbal approach to constructing social agreements.

Burning Man communicates its agreements through its Ten Principles, which act as ideological and behavioral standards for the community:

Radical Inclusion	Gifting
Decommodification	Radical Self-Reliance
Radical Self-Expression	Communal Effort
Civic Responsibility	Leaving No Trace
Participation	Immediacy

These principles headline the website and organizational emails, are printed on welcome materials, are scrawled across infrastructure all over Black Rock City, and are verbally reinforced by fellow burners during and beyond the festival. Importantly, they are well communicated both in advance and during the immersive event.

As Burning Man Managing Director Heather White reminds, these principles are "descriptive rather than prescriptive."[13] Significant community buy-in has resulted from the trust that participants will exercise them as they deem appropriate. According to the 2015 Burning Man Census, 87.1% of attendees found the principles important personally (Heller et al. 2016), and the 2016 Census reports 94.2% thought the principles were important for creating an authentic Burning Man experience (DeVaul et al. 2017). Community buy-in runs deep.

Still, safety concerns are communicated bluntly on the back of each ticket. Gate workers verbally confirm that attendees are keenly aware of these agreements upon entry.

Artists and organizations can learn four core lessons from Burning Man's success communicating its social agreements: 1. Displaying trust to attendees empowers them to think critically about how they wish to enact the agreement, encouraging buy-in; 2. Both showing and telling goes a long way; 3. Distributing expectations widely before and during the event eliminates surprise, allowing participants to feel in control; and 4. Safety concerns should be bluntly addressed.

Concluding Discussion

People support the things they help create. In immersive performances, audience members become part of the creative tapestry as prosumers,

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[12] Interview with author, April 18, 2016.
[13] Interview with author, May 16, 2016.

simultaneously producing and consuming the performance as they activate the space. Immersive performance is thus an inclusive practice that prioritizes accessibility. As accessibility is currently a hot topic with funders (in addition to being the right thing to do for our community and arts sustainability), there is even more reason to pursue the engagement method of immersive performance.

However, it may not be reasonable or possible for some organizations and artists to satisfy the six criteria immediately. That's alright, as long as improved engagement – rather than immersion – is the goal. A performance will still be made more engaging if some but not all of the criteria are implemented. Each criterion can be used as a guide and evaluative tool for engagement, or as a complete set to qualify a production as immersive.

As the term "immersive" has increasingly been used to engage audiences and describe art during the era of the experience economy, it has become important for arts leaders to agree upon what the term means. Using the proposed criteria, artists and organizations wishing to engage through immersive performance can do so consistently and in a codified way. Through temporal and spatial zoning, agency of viewpoint, never establishing a fourth wall, continuity of experience, multisensory engagement, and interactivity, productions become immersive. Establishing social agreements enables participation.

Burning Man is a predominantly white, young, and wealthy event, requiring a week away from work to attend. In comparison, most arts performances are only evening-length commitments. Therefore, Burning Man as a case study has limitations as a comparator for audience development beyond attracting its current demographics. However, the festival's engagement successes provide clarity, fodder, and terminology to springboard further research into the audience development implications of immersive performance.

While this paper explores the criteria and implications of immersive performances for audience engagement, these three critical questions remain for further study:

1. Does immersive performance maintain, improve, or lessen audience diversity? How does beginning to offer immersive performances impact current/inclined/disinclined audience members at an organization currently presenting traditional performances?
2. Must immersive performances be for small audiences only? Can a facilitated experience remain germane when a group becomes large? Burning Man successfully offers an immersive experience for 70,000 participants each year, but most immersive performances cater to small audiences. How can organizations that rely on filling large theatres for revenue consider offering immersive performances?
3. How do production expenses for immersive performances compare with those needed to produce traditional performances?

By revolutionizing performance methods, artists and organizations have the power to better engage audiences, transforming them from spectators into participants. As arts leaders, we must pave the way by establishing criteria. Immersive performances offer a compelling engagement answer in the era of the experience economy.

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