



Kensho: Heartbeat Beneath the Desert at Burning Man



How pulsating living can be when I live – when I really breathe in the now, with the alkaline dust of the desert settling on my skin, onto my eyelashes, and sifting into my lungs. Watching the sunrise on the seventh morning of the Burning Man festival, I head towards my tent for a short nap. I walk across the wide flat desert floor that we call the playa, my glow sticks grown sleepy ease towards their end. The desert lacks any vegetation and instead stretches itself towards the mountains on the horizon. Art pieces lean into the morning winds and sprinkle the playa. Some stand hundreds of feet above the desert floor, large pieces of metal welded together into colossal tree houses or worshipping figures, others are sunken into the earth so that their existence is hidden. Surrounding the playa is a semi-circle of tents, RVs, and large domes that house more than 50,000 characters for our days in the Nevada desert. I pass couples huddling together against the morning chill, walking down roadways that break our temporary city into organized patterns. I pass lone figures on stilts making their way home. The wild beauty of my desert home sinks into my heart, into its beat that is steady and ignored deep within me.



A few hours later I find myself on a hard stool surrounded by new friends, finishing a bloody mary with its bits of mango and soured cucumber. I sip from the crusted metal cup that someone had handed to me when a strong faced woman enters our space. In the breaths between sobs, she tells us that we must go lie down on the heart. I don't know what her words mean yet am fascinated by how tears streak the dust on her face, racing down towards the dust of the playa. She repeats that we must lie on the heart. I put down my now even dirtier cup and head out with a vague destination following thin Neil in his top hat and suspenders holding up striped shorts and his new blue-eyed girlfriend in her ripped fishnet stockings. They seem to know where we're heading.

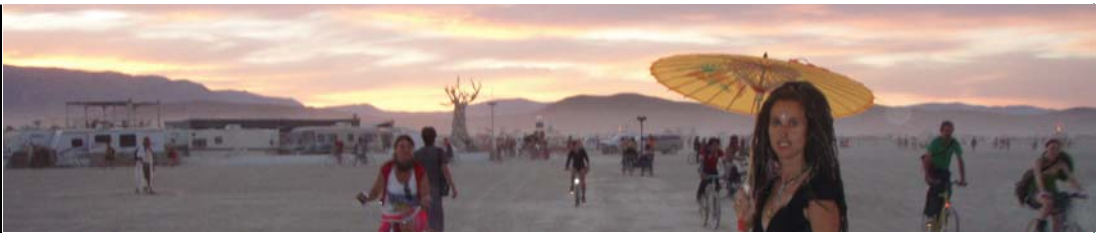




The playa is endless, and we make our way slowly through the quickly increasing heat that licks my skin with a touch of lifted sand. My mouth still holds the moistness of the tomato juice of the bloody mary, but my skin is tinted dry by the tiny particles of dust. We meander and somehow find our way to the heart. The three of us stand there looking down at the thin dull-red material cut out into the shape of a heart, partly surrounded by a leaning fence resembling metal borders that a gardener may add to divide up her beds. A small foot-wide sign states that this is the heart of Gaia. A sign instructs: “butt here” as if we are to sit on the sand of the playa. I stifle a moment of disappointment, although I have no real expectations. How is it that one can be disappointed without knowing why? I just can’t imagine what could be so powerful about sitting on the paper-thin red heart positioned in the vast desert.

We look at each other unsure of who should begin. The fast beat of techno drifts from a distance, but otherwise we are alone. The dusty burnt-red heart has plenty of space for several bodies, but it does not occur to us to share the experience. Neil and I stand together as ripped stockings girl disobeys the sign and instead lies down on the red heart. No response except a smile that transforms her face into great beauty. The wind pelts my shoulders with tiny heated grains of sand; the dry heat of the open desert must now be over 110 degrees. I stand looking down at her and worry that my morning sunblock applicator friend had missed some spots. Is it possible that I’ll burn on this last day in the desert?

She gets up and I lie down. My breath catches. I melt into the heartbeat. Beneath me, within me, from the dust of the earth is a strong heartbeat. I lie under the burning direct sun, in the middle of the desert, with my pink cotton scarf shielding my face from the dust and heat and the heart beat of the planet twists into my back, moves into my fingertips, my breath. My body’s rhythm tries to match the rhythm traveling through me. I hear the



distant heartbeat and feel it strongly pulse into me. It invades my most intimate spaces, it enters into me. I can't experience this alone. In this moment, I am connected to every living human, to every living organism, to every stone and dirt particle, to each object that normally lacks a heartbeat. I invite the others to lie with me. The three of us lie there together with our bodies touching, my old college lover and his new girl friend, holding each other's hands. How is it possible to feel and hear this heartbeat? I don't need to know the answer. I just know that I am lying on the earth and feeling her heartbeat, and in this moment, I am connected at the most elemental level to all.

Time is passing and I readjust my thin scarf to cover my face more fully. A shadow darkens the sun and a man in the shadow introduces himself as the artist. I reach out to him and ask him to lie down with us. The four of us lie there together; I hold the artist's hand in my hand and hold his dry blond curls with my blue-painted fingertips. We lie there with the heartbeat passing through all of us.

"How is this possible?" Neil asks the artist. The long-haired artist with vertical dimples explains that he buried a subwoofer attached to an ipod in a wooden box 17 inches below the desert floor. The 17 inches of playa transport the pulse of the heart and dampen its sound, but both reach us as we lie above the wooden box. He explains that it's all solar powered, how he has had to replace the trickle-charged battery. The explanation does not take away the magic of lying on the earth with these three humans who in this moment are my truest friends. I tell him how he should install these as his lifework. He shares that his lifework is fixing brains as a surgeon. I smile. So burning man, here is everything possible. He tells me how digging the hole in the desert was a personal journey, he hints at the challenge of moving around hardened and packed desert earth. Installing the heart was a journey of his merging with the artist within.



I hold his hand and him and know that I want others to experience lying on the heartbeat of the earth. I want to bring his art brainchild to my region, to install it in my front yard, at the national mall in DC, in parks all over. I want people to lie on the earth and feel a heartbeat. I don't think anyone is the same afterwards. He tells me that he recorded a slightly arrhythmic heart because the heart of our planet is ailing. But its heartbeat is still strong. We fall into silence and lie on the hardness of the desert floor beneath our bones, with only the slightly arrhythmic heart pumping and pulsating its way through us.

(Note: Many of the photos in this section were taken at burning man 2008. I was so entranced by my experienced in 2007 that I practically took only a few photos. To maintain historical accuracy, I chose photos that could have been taken in 2007.)