

Observations and Reflection : AGM 2016

I think it's fair to say that our tenth year has been a coming of age for AfrikaBurn. We are visibly maturing, both as an event and as an organisation, underscored this past year in more ways than one.

At just over 12 000 people in 2016, Tankwa Town had a population on par with Springbok, making it one of the largest communities in the Northern Cape.

We can no longer afford to think simply about staging an event - we are building a city. An ephemeralopolis, no doubt, but a city nonetheless.

We've reached the outer edges of our current event operational capacity and need to push through to the next level in order to properly hold our community. We're tooling up where we can, in order to alleviate the physical burden of set up and break down over 50 days in the desert - investing in infrastructure and equipment, and making smart partnerships that open up new possibilities while addressing immediate needs.

Ten years in, we've reached the point where much more is expected of each portfolio and each member of the team. And we've spent considerable effort working together to find the holes in our systems, improve our practice as a whole, and spread the load more responsibly and effectively. 2017 will be a year to fine-tune, refine, and properly entrench our new systems. And define and apply new systems in key areas where we've lagged.

Raising the profile of Rangers, and expanding the Ranger body is a key focus in the coming months. As is the broader scope of work in the Volunteer portfolio, bringing into focus the opportunities for year-round volunteering within the AB ops teams, and opportunities for our community to volunteer as a practice, whether inside or outside of AB activities. This speaks to a core value of our culture.

We've begun the long process of identifying specific individual parcels of work that can be handed to volunteers in a way that is manageable and sustainable alongside everyday work and family obligations. This is critical to the sustainability of the organisation in the long term, and a powerful avenue of communal effort, through which members of our community can play a greater role in the shape of the event and the evolution of our culture.

We have been carefully examining our portfolio structures and working practice across the board, taking steps to spread responsibility across a number of individuals, with specific areas of focus but mapped to the whole - with the aim of increasing capacity and opening up clearly defined routes for succession planning.

Outreach has been recontextualised as a function of the ops team, rather than a responsibility contained only in one portfolio. Considerable effort has been made to more clearly define the avenues of activity that AfrikaBurn Outreach engages in, consulting the broader community to understand where they believe the priorities should lie, and we are on our way to laying a solid foundation of best practice.

"X" was the midway point in the current cycle of DAC funding. And "Play" is our last year of guaranteed funding from the DAC, but the project has had a measurably positive impact on our creative community, the teams they have chosen to work with, and the landscape of Tankwa Town. So we will apply again and continue exploring other funding opportunities that align with our ethos.

We've successfully applied for funding from the City of Cape Town in support of Streetopia 2016. The long-term thinking is to develop a model for a community-based event that can be activated in

any community in a way that is self-sustaining and community-driven.

This year we have sought and received some financial and in-kind support from the businesses of Obs and Obs Civic Association, and we hope this marks the start of a sustainable model that can run itself, supported (rather than carried) by AfrikaBurn.

We tried something new this year with Decompression, taking it further out to Kilarney. Those who braved the cold felt the magic of a space far more akin to Tankwa Town than any previous, and we hope more of our community will make "the trek" out to join us next year.

That said, we are seriously considering the possibility of handing Decompression to creative crews, or a distinct and separate team, to stage. It's spot on the AfrikaBurn Mighty Timeline is at a high pressure period for the ops team, at a time when they are just coming out the other side of the event critical path.

So 2017 is not so much a pause year, rather an essential period to really bed down wherever possible the considerable work we've done these past 18 months, to start alleviating the pressure on the team.

Post event is always a busy time, with debriefings, planning sessions and budgeting for the next cycle. It is also a period of introspection and reflection, and this year we've turned a keen eye on our internal values and how they line up with our daily practice. Collectively we are actively working to deepen our adherence to the principles and define what this looks like in the course of year-round operation in the default world. Much of this was explored at the annual AfrikaBurn Bosberaad this year and we will continue working to refine and manifest the ideas and philosophical positions opened up over the course of that weekend-long think tank.

Despite some wobbles in the course of the year, the team are as committed as ever to the work at hand. Navigating change is always a little uncomfortable at the same time as being quite exhilarating. We are a culture in evolution, and so it is perfectly natural and logical that the way we work and the work we do must also continue to evolve. Our mission statement invites us to imagine the world anew, and that must always start with us.

We remain a popular opportunity for international interns, and have just been joined by one from Germany who will support the creative portfolio and Off Centre Camp program development for this cycle. But going forward we are aiming rather to support skills development in SA, and have begun investigating how to go about this in a way that opens up opportunity for people outside of our general social network.

Our first local intern started in August and will be with us for a year, working under the mentorship of our events manager. And we are actively seeking a second to work as an admin assistant to the finance lead.

We are very proud of Nokubonga, who formally joined the team in September as our office manager - she is making a hugely positive contribution to our office environment and provides valuable support to the team. This is the positive power of community at work.

Our community is vibrant and strong and naturally seeks to propagate. Events like Aftermath and Sentella are a natural and exciting outcome. But we must remain wary of culture pirates - those who seek to commodify our culture and event. This remains a challenge the ops team faces, both externally (with events like Burning Carnival), and internally with Plug and Play camps. We have strategies in place to address and arrest the spread of these practices that threaten our home and culture. And on the flip side to better support those practices that honour and build on our ethos.

For the third year now we've had a creative exchange with the Lakes of Fire regional, sending long-time DPW volunteer and artist Sol Wicher. This year we have also supported three team members in visiting and working with Burning Man - Sonica and Helena in a works exchange

program at BRC, and Monique, exploring avenues of mutual support and development between AfrikaBurn and the Burning Man Project.

Looking forward : November to October

November : We start the month with the Community Week out in the Tankwa. Previously called the Donkey Weekend, this has by necessity evolved into a weeklong trip to provide this community service to those who live too far out to access the activities at the Padstal.

Streetopia promises to be another lovely Saturday gathering on the village green and surrounds at the end of the month.

AfrikaBurn event production critical path starts, with DDTs, tickets-go-live, grant assessments and procurement across all portfolios. We are pulling our work schedule back in order to alleviate pressure in the run up to the event dates.

December : a mandatory two week closedown period from the 16th, so the team has a decent break before the AfrikaBurn critical path intensifies in the new year. This is designed to ensure we have a strong, well rested team before the mad dash to Tankwa

January - February : sees the bulk of project registrations come in, the second batch of DDTs and the final general sale, and the ops team kicking into overdrive.

March - April : The focus will be firmly on the AfrikaBurn event and the inevitable trouble-shooting. Shit gets really real round about now, and caffeine becomes an important substitute for sleep.

May : post event wrap up, portfolio debriefs, trouble-shooting and preliminary planning for improvements. This is also an important period for key communications and for harnessing volunteer enthusiasm - people are fully engaged in the positive aspects of the event and actively looking for ways to carry the gees through the in-between times.

June : team debrief and future-focussed planning session. Preliminary budgeting.
Decompression

July : budget hand in for all portfolios, and the annual Bosberaad for all playing an active role the AfrikaBurn organisation.

August : annual reviews for all members of the team, budget finalization
Bosberaad working groups

September : Streetopia content and event planning
Bosberaad working groups
Special members meeting

October : AGM and associated prep
So there you have it. Another year done and dusted, and the new year firmly on foot and hurtling toward the next critical path.

Wish us luck and if you can, join us on the journey. I promise you it's a wonderfully challenging and exhilarating ride.