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## Under fire Ethnography of a flame

Kim Gurney

I am lit in frustration. I am burning the clothes of a fruit and vegetable trader. His name is Mohamed Bouazizi. He has reached the end of his tether with officialdom, bureaucracy and petty humiliations. He doesn't know it yet, but together we will help trigger a revolution.

I am lit in rage. My instigators stand alongside with their hands aloft and their fingers in victory signs, their faces covered with balaclavas. I am churning out thick, dark, billowing black clouds above my red and orange belly. All I can see is the tar beneath me and the upturned skip alongside. A photographer leans forward to take my picture to send around the world. It will be headlined 'Bahrain rage: protesters denounce "lavish" race as Vettel claims chequered flag'.

I am lit in scepticism. I am licking R100 notes, one after the other. The kids are laughing at me, dressed in their designer threads. I am nearly doused by custard spewed in my direction. The hunger grows, stoked with Carvela shoes. Each shoe earns me R1 000 in destruction points, but I can't stop there. Kurt Geiger and Polo shirts are next in this spectacle of what cultural theorist Sarah Nuttall (2012) has described 'conspicuous destruction'.<sup>1</sup> I am called *Izikhothane*.

I am lit in violence. I am sorry to say that I destroyed 50 buildings in the city's historic centre. These reportedly included several landmarks in Athens, while shops selling luxury goods were looted. I am told the smell of teargas and soot lingered for days.

I am lit in metaphor. 'The smoke that calls' is my name. I am a report from the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

Kim Gurney is research associate, Research Centre, Visual Identities in Art & Design at the University of Johannesburg. [freelance@telkomsa.net](mailto:freelance@telkomsa.net)



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**I am lit in awareness. I am fuelling a kinetic sculpture in the form of a polar bear on a tightrope high above the audience. As I burn, he moves in a touching and graceful way. Finally, the gas runs out and I slowly extinguish both myself and him.<sup>2</sup>**

I am lit in corporate speak. The company no longer resembles a man standing on the edge of a burning oil platform with the sea as his only option for survival, according to the CEO.

I am lit in political strategy. I am gutting the remains of a truck that is burnt to a stark frame of its former self. Sasolburg residents walk by – all except one. She jubilates right in front of me, a rioting ballerina perfectly poised in what is known as the fifth position. Lanky arms reach for the sky in a narrow ‘O’ to echo the shape of her mouth. Her fingers give the victory salute.

I am lit in a ‘day of rage’. An historic square has turned into a battlefield between protestors and police. Rocks, bottles and fire are pitched against teargas and water cannon. I am burning fiercely the interior of a paramilitary vehicle with *Carabinieri* stencilled in precise letters on its bonnet. Above, scrawled in even larger capitals, is the word ‘LOSER’.

I am lit in the imagination. RDP home-dwellers fear a fiery xenophobic surge.

I am lit in protest. I am burning the robes of a 15-year-old Tibetan monk. This is the fourth robe that I have burned in 24 hours – a record.

I am lit in quotation marks. ‘When they caught him, they showed the guy no mercy,’ a Gugulethu resident is quoted in a newspaper report. ‘He was beaten and set alight. People are just tired of being robbed.’

I am lit in mockery. I am destroying an effigy of Muammar Gaddafi.

**I am lit to cook. My greasy traces have darkened this wall with the trash at its feet. The artist scratches away at my residue, scraping the form of a figure into the gritty surface to bring to life a woman called *Hover*.**

I am lit in opposition. I am licking the edges of a portrait on a black T-shirt, held by several people outside the High Court. The portrait is of the president.

I am lit in rebellion. A rather polite one, in the broader scheme of things. I am destroying, page by page, copies of tax demands. Greek citizens look on, but I am a little embarrassed by my size.

I am lit in symbolism. I have given my form to a crackdown on homeless people in Johannesburg’s city centre, in an operation called ‘Chachamela’. It means ‘walking on burning coals’. The author noticed me because of the sudden disappearance one day of hundreds of sidewalk sleepers on Pritchard Street.

I am lit in perverted authority. I am eating a rubber tyre on top of a pickup. Inside, a man gesticulates and three others laughingly look on. Together, they are marking a Kisumu roadblock during post-election violence.

I am lit in desperation. First, the door was taken off the house where three Western Cape farmworkers live. Then I took over. Blankets, clothes, everything.

I am lit in boredom. Gangs have taken over some London streets to loot shops, firebomb buildings and burn city centres. I have caused millions of pounds worth of damage and killed five people. Right now, I am destroying an ornate Victorian pub in the Aston district of Birmingham. Later, punters will resurrect the same. A scorch mark on the bar will be the only reminder I was ever here.

I am lit in barbaric attack. Four masked men broke into a radio studio and poured petrol over the Bolivian presenter and then summonsed me. Reportedly, I am politically motivated.

**I am lit in social commentary. The artist raises me to the paper and creates ghostly smoke drawings of people, including Gaddafi, in a work called 'The Butcher's Altar'.**

I am lit in remembrance. The man poured flammable liquid over himself at a Tel Aviv protest to mark other protests and brought me along. People tried to put me out with shirts and water. I am not sure why I am here. The authorities think it has something to do with the high cost of living and other social issues.

I am lit in demonstration. I turned a very large truck in central Johannesburg into a cinder, shortly after it was stoned. A policeman is walking by. My plumes are still out of control. I am in my fifth day of burning trucks and cars. I am making a point about wages in the trucking sector. The author almost glimpsed me when she saw a truck stoned by marching protestors as it accelerated in a panic from End Street.

I am lit in criminal mischief. I woke up a Berlin pensioner across the street with a loud explosion shortly after midnight. By then, I was already billowing out of two Mercedes Benz cars. So far, I have racked up 26 cars in the capital over 48 hours.

I am lit in remedy. The dry wood burns well, but the wax smoulders. A disease has infested these Cape hives. And the only cure is fire. The resident bees must, for their own good, find new homes.

I am lit against austerity. I am licking the canvas of a painting by French artist Severine Bourguignon, who is watching me via Skype. This is just the first performance in a series. The gallery director will keep inviting me back three times a week until the arts in Italy receive more funding.

I am lit in suspicious circumstances. You can see I was here from the sooty devastation on the walls around the window frames of this Mujuru farmhouse. The dead man's grandchildren used to enter using these self-same windows instead of the front door. That used to make his wife laugh.

**I am lit in artistic conflagration. I reduce to ashes every manner of thing at this mass gathering in the middle of the Karoo – a local version of *Burning Man*.**

I am lit in apathy. Teenagers in Vancouver think I'm cool. Nobody quite knows why – not even the teenagers, it seems.

I am lit in celebration. I have created a vast plume of smoke, a veritable cloud that defies its nature to hug the earth. I am devouring his tent, symbolically ending a 42-year dictatorship.

I am lit in threat. 'We will burn your shop – and we'll burn you.' From right-wing Greek extremists to a Pakistani immigrant who owns a hair salon. I never really got going here.

I am lit in vigilantism. I burnt to death three young men from Khayelitsha accused by members of the community of stealing a generator from a church.

I am lit in illusion. I am a burning fireplace that, for 12 hours, will be broadcast on prime television in Norway. Firewood specialists are providing colour commentary, expert advice and a bit of cultural tutoring, including music and poems.

I am lit at an estimated cost of \$200m a day. I am part of a strike by Chileans over tax and working conditions. I am unnecessary and illegal, according to the finance minister.

I am lit in excitement. I am burning cars (again!) but this time in Belfast. It's not sectarian violence, says one community leader, but 'the visceral excitement of disorder'.

I am lit for light. But something goes wrong and I soon spread in this 'bad building', perhaps the worst of its kind, in Johannesburg. I am about to make inhumane conditions even worse as I balloon out of the top floor. But my reception is muted; I have clearly been here before. An audience gathers on the rooftop right above me for a better view. The author across the street watches them watching me.

**I am lit in performance. I power a series of firecrackers spread on a table under a Cape Town bridge and as they go off, the performance artist rolls his body on top of me.**

I am lit in indignation. Right now, I am burning the top end of a blue sofa, which has had its stuffing pretty much pulled apart. We are positioned in the middle of a Sasolburg road. Residents don't want the municipality merged with a neighbouring one. Border disputes keep me alive. I tried to burn down the police station earlier, but failed. I settled for a *spaza* shop instead, but residents extinguished my fire. Not all the residents are so disposed. One standing next to a smouldering tyre said: 'If we need to burn down this place, then it's fine.'

I am lit by accident. I will cost the company responsible for this blowout in the Gulf of Mexico about \$38 billion.

I am lit in disgust. Rustenburg mineworkers rejecting management's offer have set alight pamphlets detailing the proposed settlement. I am struggling to look impressive; I need a little more bulk. I am only about halfway through my task.

I am lit by looters. They torched a lot of cars with me and broke into shops and threw stones. But protestors against Romanian austerity measures have distanced themselves from me.

I am lit in dire straits. I am burning Zambian hardwood trees to charcoal. People have to pay the bills.

I am lit for fashion. I am participating in a ‘destruction series’ photo-shoot by a young Hollywood provocateur. I am trying to destroy a Birkin bag, which cost \$100,000. The bag-burner’s girlfriend is standing alongside and as soon as I am done, she will take a chainsaw to whatever is left. She doesn’t know it yet, but her ‘art’ will earn her death threats.

**I am lit for paint, to scar and wound canvases in a palimpsest of haunted markings. When I bite too hard, the artist has to quell me with water. Over and over.**

I am lit in sociopathic behaviour. A child thought I would be a joke. So I am burning the hair of a teacher while she writes on the chalkboard.

I am lit in a game of double-or-quits. I am raging across several tyres in the middle of the road. Hundreds of protestors line up behind me – a barricade. They are blocking a Buenos Aires bridge during a general strike against government policies.

I am lit in propaganda. I am apparently devouring New York after it was reportedly attacked by a North Korean rocket. The nest of wickedness is ablaze, according to my fabulists.

I am lit in seething anger. Poor sanitation and services triggered protests, ignited by the death of two schoolchildren in a car accident along a busy Kagiso road.

I am lit in prejudice. ‘Burn the bitch.’ That’s what the placard said.

I am lit in mystery. Firefighters have battled for several hours to contain me. I will later take two lives as the facade of this historic Johannesburg inner-city building tumbles after its gutting. The lives belong to two scrap recyclers. I am observed by a rooftop audience swapping speculative stories about me. I am terribly impressive. Once I’ve left, the author will cross behind the police line to find out more and watch in the rain as sniffer dogs search for bodies. Later, mattress sellers who used to work in that building will tell her how they piled their wares several high to save the people jumping from the upper stories.

**I am lit in experimentation. I am burning fiercely a piano, that was bought from the classifieds for R500, on a Johannesburg building rooftop. The strings pop and crackle as I go. I am being recorded by embedded, handmade microphones. Later, after the piano has fallen on its face and has slowly been reduced to ashes, I will be transformed into a unique musical composition.**

I am lit. I am lit. I am lit.

## Notes

- 1 Nuttall cites, in turn, Megan Jones. Author’s audio recording, 26 May 2012. *What happened in 2081? Congress on the Future of Johannesburg*. Centre for Historical Re-enactments, New Doornfontein.
- 2 The artists who variously use burning in their work, cited in this article in bold, are in order of appearance: Brendhan Dickerson, Hannelie Coetzee, Diane Victor, AfrikaBurn, Sello Pesa, Sandile Zulu, João Orecchia and The Skeleton Crew.