

Burning Man lights a fire

Contributed by Katherine K. Chen
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BEST OF IMAGINE 2003 (tie). The Nevada desert art event doesn't just produce art, it produces citizens.

A group gathers around the Man each morning to watch the sun rise. (George Post)

Drive along the state roads toward the Black Rock Desert, a former lakebed surrounded by mountains in northwest Nevada. Stock up on food, water, and camping goods in the gambling city of Reno. Drive past a gypsum mine and through Gerlach, a once bustling train depot that boasts three bars and a taxidermy stand. Turn at the painted arrow from the blacktop paved road onto the temporary road pressed into the crusty desert surface. Slide your vehicle in a "slot" at the Gate, where dust-streaked men and women collect your ticket and check for stowaways. A short distance later, the exuberant and wackily attired (or unattired) Greeters shower you with a warm "Welcome home!", maps, and information about camping guidelines. A clown in leather fetish attire and armed with a whip might even entice you to exit your vehicle and mount the Clown Cross, upon which you are gently but firmly indoctrinated as a citizen of Black Rock City.

Welcome to Burning Man, a temporary arts community that appears and disappears each year on four square miles of a normally uninhabited desert.

Seven days demarcate the official lifespan of this self-styled alternative society, where most monetary transactions are prohibited (the exceptions being ice and coffee sales), and participation is strongly encouraged. Using the map and street signs marked with names that reflect the event's changing theme ("Imagined" and "Dogma" for the 2003 "Beyond Belief" theme, "4:20" and "Head" for 2000's "The Body" theme), locate your campsite and park your vehicle. As you anchor your tent with long metal stakes to prevent the winds from carrying off your belongings, your neighbors stop by and introduce themselves. Visit the nearest portable toilet and pack some drinking water. Memorize your camp location (near the PVC dome covered with Christmas lights and military netting and to the left of a furry reproduction of the cat-shaped bus from the Japanese animation film *My Neighbor Totoro*) before you explore the city. As you travel on foot, by bike, or art car towards the city center, orient your location relative to Black Rock City's anchor, the 40-foot neon and wooden sculpture of the Man.

On this expanse of alkaline desert, which once tested the survival of emigrant expeditions, discover large and small-scale art installations, some of which depict the year's art theme. Unlike conventional art institutions, no security guard prevents you from peering too closely. In fact, some installations invite your participation to "complete" the art "you can taste, smell, manipulate, and alter it in ways prohibited elsewhere. Chip away at a slowly melting ice ball to make a snow cone, crawl through an ammonite-spiraled maze, recline upon a bed of imported grass, listen to a band perform in a chapel made of stained glass-like mosaics of recycled plastics, and dangle from a jungle gym-like sculpture. Your fellow Black Rock City citizens "some of whom sport elaborate costumes, glittering body paint, or nothing at all" may join you in appreciating the art, give you a friendly nod or an encouraging shout, or invite you to participate in an impromptu game or party. Art cars decorated as Spanish galleons with cannon ball-ridden sails, fire-breathing dragons, and other fantastic designs occasionally lurch by and disgorge passengers. Meander among the camps that sport different themes, ranging from an elaborate recreation of *Mad Max's* Thunderdome to a simple site that reunites lost film with their owners.

As the sun melts into the horizon, volunteer Lamplighters ritualistically lift kerosene lanterns to tall wooden spires, lighting the central city streets for the evening. Sleep rapidly becomes a precious commodity, as nightfall's cooler temperature brings out performers who spin fire, thumping music, powerful lasers, and vehicles and people decorated with EL wire, or "cool" glowing neon. Saturday evening, gather at the city center for the event's traditional highlight. As hundreds of performers spin fire and fireworks explode overhead, the Man burns. Joining in the revelry, some artists torch their installations that evening and the next, making way for another year's preparations.

When the ashes have cooled, pack your vehicle with your trash and gear, pick up debris from your campsite, say farewell to new friends, and prepare for the dusty ride home. A tinge of depression may descend as the distance increases between you and Black Rock City, signaling your return to everyday life. But for many, Burning Man does not end with this departure.

For my doctoral dissertation, I examined how people expend significant efforts organizing this event and related activities. Among other topics, I focused on how volunteers and members gained organizing experiences and skills by working for the Black Rock City Limited Liability Company, the organization that manages Burning Man's development.

A significant number of people are so drawn to the Burning Man experience that they recreate it on a year-round basis, albeit on a different scale. On a June evening in 2003, for instance, I squeeze into a pickup driven by Nana Kirk, a

landscape architect who volunteers for Burning Man's Playa Information, a question and answer service. Her date accompanies us. My companions giggle as they adjust their attire, which includes a prom dress "enhanced" by stuffing tissues into the bodice and a silver brocade dinner jacket that will later win a ribbon for gaudiness. We are headed to "Tacky Prom," a benefit for the Carousel Numinous theme camp's art project at the upcoming Burning Man event. At entrance to a small club in Berkeley, California, we pay for our tickets and descend into the balloon-festooned recreation of a prom. The DJ spins cheesy tunes, including Madonna's "Like a Virgin" and Donna Summers' "Ring My Bells," the multiple decades represented by the prom-goers. Another friend, Burning Man Playa Information Manager Rob Oliver, shows up in hooded sweatshirt and sweats, posing as the "surfer dude" who crashes the prom. He joins us as we watch others, who sport gaudy thrift shop finds, and talk about plans for Burning Man. Most of the prom attendees had heard of this event either from a Burning Man email list or from the Squid List, an electronic distribution list of Bay area events. This is only one of the many benefits thrown by theme camps that are preparing for the upcoming Burning Man event.

The next day, I sit in Burning Man's expansive new headquarters, a move made possible by the dot-com bust that popped San Francisco's inflated office rental market. Steve Raspa, an artist and event planner, is chatting with other co-workers about how he would have promoted more interactivity and performances for another Burning Man volunteer event that drew several hundred to the San Francisco Opera's warehouse. As I listen, I reflect on the factors that have generated a critical mass of these smaller local events, which rival the conventional art events sponsored by museums, art galleries, and other institutions. Burning Man-related events require intensive planning and support, often by individuals who previously did not consider themselves to be artists or organizers capable of throwing such events. A few of these individuals have even formed their own organizations to host alternative art events. What factors facilitated such a shift towards active organizing?

A boy makes a snowcone from an interactive ice sculpture. (George Post)

The first flames

On the summer solstice of 1986, Larry Harvey, a landscaper, and Jerry James, a carpenter, constructed a small wooden sculpture of a man and brought it to a secluded San Francisco beach. Surrounded by a small gathering of friends and family, the duo lit the sculpture afire.

They continued to do so in front of growing crowds on an annual basis until 1990, when a San Francisco park official intervened with the burn. Over the next two decades, this informal, unnamed evening developed into an annual weeklong camp-out that draws increasing numbers of attendees to its new location in the Nevada Black Rock Desert. Attracted by the opportunities to construct, display, and burn outsider art and engage in round-the-clock revelry, about 30,000 or so people from around the world currently amass for the event.

Most media reports tend to emphasize the event's more flamboyant and controversial aspects, such as the elaborate costuming, art, music, and performances, spectacular bonfires, drug and alcohol consumption, and the possible environmental damage to the federally managed site and its historic trails. Other reports note the event's other unusual tenets, such as its demand that attendees actively participate in the building of art and community and the event's eschewing of vending and corporate sponsorship that support other conventional events. Rather than selling or purchasing goods or services, some event attendees barter, while others give trinkets or needed objects as gifts without the expectation of reciprocation. Few reports indicate the massive scale of organizing needed to erect and disassemble the event, and even fewer reports delve into how the experience of organizing such an event has both educated and inspired event-goers to organize in their local communities.

In effect, the small bonfire on a secluded beach has sparked a social movement across the United States and other parts of the world. Attendees apply "Burning Man" skills, practices, and values to not only the event but also to everyday life. Members also engage in additional organizing activities outside of the event. In short, the Burning Man organization and its event have provided the context for acquainting members with organizing skills. For the initial Burning Man evening beach burns, organizers expended limited and informal organizational efforts. However, the almost exponential growth of the Burning Man event population and its relocation to the challenging environs of the Black Rock Desert eventually forced Harvey and others to organize formally on a year-round basis. Although the organization has a small full- and part-time staff, it depends on volunteer labor to carry out the organizational mission of creating Burning Man:

Our practical goal is to create the annual event known as Burning Man "and" to generate an experience that encourages participants to do three things: (1) creatively express themselves, (2) fulfill an active role as members of our community, and (3) immediately respond to and protect that environment. In fulfilling this mission, people learn that art is not necessarily restricted to the domain of a formally educated elite "the layperson can also produce, display, and consume art.

Lamplighters beginning their evening procession. (Heather Gallagher)

Politics and partnerships

Organizers have also learned how to mobilize members quickly to influence the larger legal and political processes that affect the Burning Man event's activities and future. For example, when Nevada senators proposed federal legislation in 1999 that could have affected the event's most vulnerable resource, its access to federally managed land, Burning Man organizers successfully used email lists to mobilize constituents. Spurred by emails that described how such legislation could curtail public access to federal land and provided officials' contact information, constituents attended local meetings with political officials and wrote letters of protest to state and federal governments. With such help from event attendees and other direct lobbying efforts, Burning Man organizers successfully negotiated a provision in the legislation that explicitly excluded the Burning Man event from restricted access.

Of course, organizers and members have learned when and how to cooperate with government officials and agencies. But they maintain Burning Man's flavor of quirky creativity and carry principles such as environmental responsibility into everyday life. Aware that agencies must undertake responsibilities such as law enforcement and environmental protection, Burning Man members have formed joint ventures like the Earth Guardians to manage responsibilities collectively. A partnership between the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) officials and Burning Man members, the Earth Guardians have, for example, educated event attendees on "pack it in, pack it out" trash practices. The event has no formal trash collection capacities, so the Earth Guardians help to minimize post-event debris while still upholding the "radical self-reliance" ethic of the event. The Earth Guardians and other groups also introduced elevated platforms and barrels that protect the desert's surface from burn marks, a change that exceeded the BLM's demands. On email discussion lists, participants have shared how they imported these practices into everyday life, from cleaning up someone else's litter to donating elaborately carved burn barrels to warm police personnel at the World Trade Center site.

By attending and volunteering for Burning Man, some people have become more conscious of their abilities to break from the status quo. Instead of passively consuming conventional entertainment or relying upon other established art institutions, members learn how to make their own art events and organizations. With the event's replacement of monetary exchanges with a gift economy, some attendees have become more conscious of how giving voluntarily can spark unexpected connections. Molly Ditmore, for example, said she worried about how she could actively participate in her first Burning Man event. She decided to give away over 1,000 tampons, ibuprofen, and massages, bringing gratitude and gifts that lead to subsequent volunteer work and other art projects:

I strapped a copy of *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* [a book by Judy Blume that depicts a girl's experience with puberty] to my backpack, and I had a sign off my shoulders [that said] "Free Tampons" on one side and also I had "Mothers Way Station" and I would just sit out there during the day, and I would give people massages or give them tampons or Advil or just whatever! women totally appreciated it.

and I met a lot of really great people that way! I had people bringing me gifts the next day or bringing me ice cream or oh my girlfriend, oh thank you so much! people's reactions were just really great. I wanted to keep interacting with community, no matter what I did.

In meeting and working alongside other persons, individuals develop and pursue new interests and skills, such as fire spinning or managing small art events. As volunteer and former self-professed "dot communist" Barney Ford notes, such learning opportunities do not exist in less well-connected networks and environments:

I think the amount that I can learn from people out at Burning Man is much more vast [than what is available at my workplace] because these people are bringing a huge resource of knowledge and skills and know-how just because they want to!

And, in a refuge that lifts institutional restrictions on who can make art, event attendees can conceive of alternative ways of sharing art and comradeship that they find more fulfilling. For example, after rainstorms melted "Shona" Guerra's project, an 80-foot wide labyrinth constructed from playa mud, Guerra despaired. Like other artists who were unable to complete their art projects in the harsh desert conditions, he gave up. He went to say good-bye to the decimated labyrinth and discovered that someone else had spent hours restoring it:

and [the labyrinth] was just literally unbelievable. And it was better than it was before! It was perfect! I'm jumping around ecstatic, [wondering] how did this happen?

Well, later in the day we run into our friend [from Earth Guardians] Larry Breed and [I said], "you won't believe what happened!" And he starts crying! I knew that he had done it! He went out there and fixed it, and it was just one of the most touching and special things that has ever happened in this little life of mine.

Well, that came, as most things do, through interrelationships, through being a part of Burning Man â€¦
 By helping artists construct their projects, other event attendees become inspired to attempt their own projects. Some decide that they want to have these experiences on a more continuous basis. With the Burning Man organizationâ€™s support, some event attendees have formed regional groups in which they organize their own events and social activities, strengthening networks for year-round organizing. The New York City regional has formally organized as the Society for Experimental Art and Learning (SEAL) to raise funds to secure space in which members can meet and share art. The Austin, Texas, regional has established the Austin Artistic Reconstruction Limited Liability Company to organize their yearly event, â€œBurning Flipside.â€• Even those who have never attended the event have felt inspired to organize local events. Shelley Stallings reported to a Burning Man organizer that Alaskans have created their own version of Burning Man. In a July 1999 email newsletter, her message went out worldwide:

Last year was our first Burning Man gathering. We live on an island off the coast of British Columbia, [which is] fairly isolated and hard to get to, only [by] boat or plane â€¦ We have a small core group, 3 families, which organized the event and we invited 3 other families for a total of about 20 people. We expect it to grow some, but â€¦ we would like to keep it to a maximum of about 50 people so that we have less impact on the area and are not piled right on top of each other with our tents â€¦ we are encouraging costumes and performance this year. None of us have attended Burning Man, [we] only know of the event from the Internet â€¦
 In undertaking these local activities, participants learn how to manage volunteers and secure space and funding.

By attending an event that others might consider to be purely hedonistic or frivolous, a number of people have found not only a larger mission to enact, but also a means of sharing this mission with others through organizing. As greater numbers of people continue to experience the Burning Man event, similar organizing efforts are likely to spread, develop, and possibly even outlast the maturing Burning Man event itself. As organizer Marian Goodell claims, â€œIf this event is going to be around for fifty years, it will only be around because we empowered people with the info about how to make it run.â€• Make way for the Man. Make way for his makers.

STORY INDEX

ORGANIZATIONS >

Burning Man

Official web site.

URL: <http://www.burningman.com>

Burning Man Regionals

Burning Man groups around the U.S. and the world.

URL: <http://regionals.burningman.com>

Society for Experimental Art and Learning (SEAL)

Burning Man-inspired art group. Based in New York.

URL: <http://www.sealspace.org>

Austin Artistic Reconstruction

Burning Man-inspired art group. Based in Austin, Texas.

URL: <http://www.burningflipside.com>

PUBLICATIONS >

Media Coverage of Burning Man

Links to coverage of 2003 Burning Man event.

URL: http://www.burningman.com/blackrockcity_yearround/written_reflections/media_coverage.html

Laughing Squid

Web-based listing of alternative art events in the San Francisco Bay Area.

URL: <http://www.laughingsquid.org>