

# BUILDING/BURNING/MAN

NEWSLETTER OF THE BURNING MAN PROJECT

June 1992

Vol. 1 No. 1

## WHAT IS BURNING MAN?

by Richard Washburn

*Every year, around Labor Day, a forty-foot wooden statue stuffed full of fireworks is set alight in the middle of a Nevada desert. As he burns, his devotees dance around his pyre. Though they are seeing nearly a year of hard work going up in smoke, they seem happy in the knowledge that their creation was never more alive than in his spectacular death.*

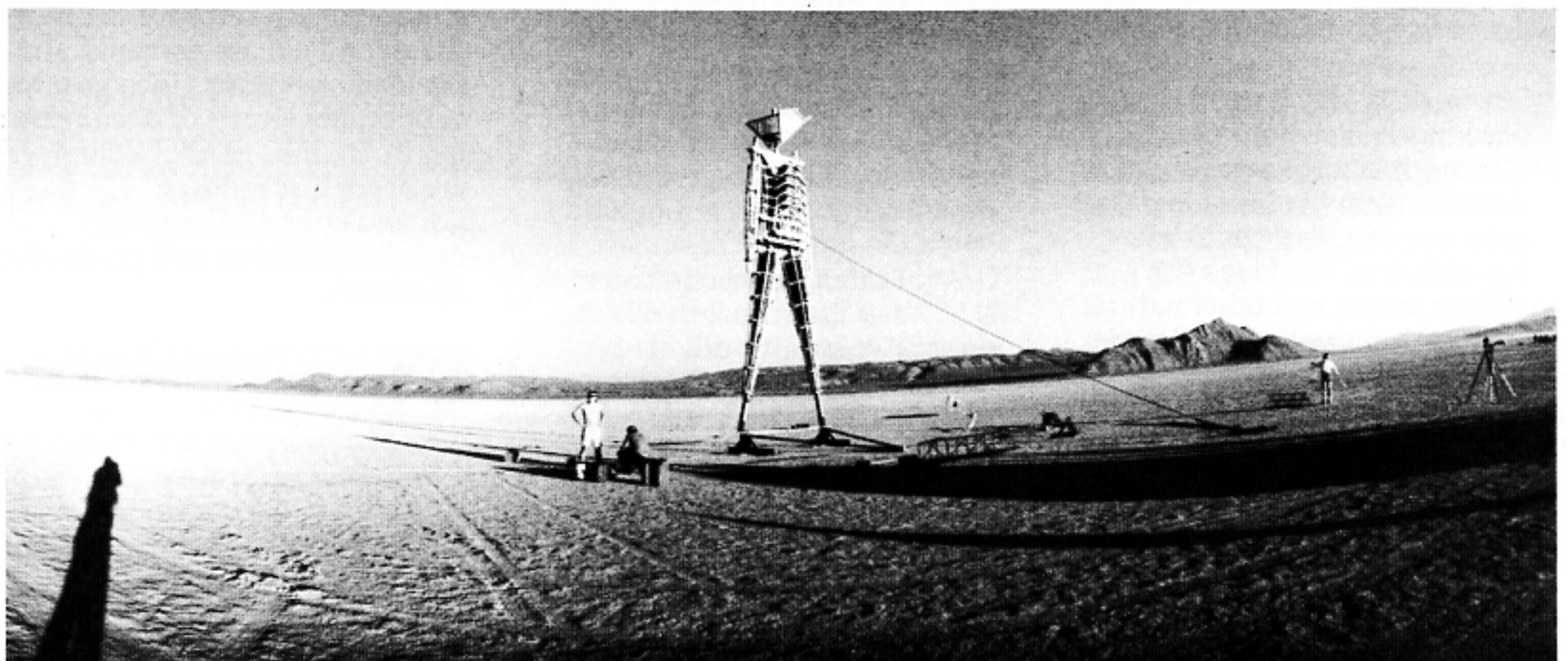
Some see the event as performance art between audience and performers. No surprise then, that many of Burning Man's followers are cyber-culture types, interested in the development of two-way media and interactive art forms. For others the event has spiritual significance: a revival of "primitive" rituals that

contemplate the interdependence of death and life in the cycle of nature, a sacrificial tribute to the all-sustaining, all-consuming power of the sun. At any rate, the days leading up to the ritual burning are reminiscent of a mystery pageant: full of torchlight parades, sacred dances, masking and holy revelry.

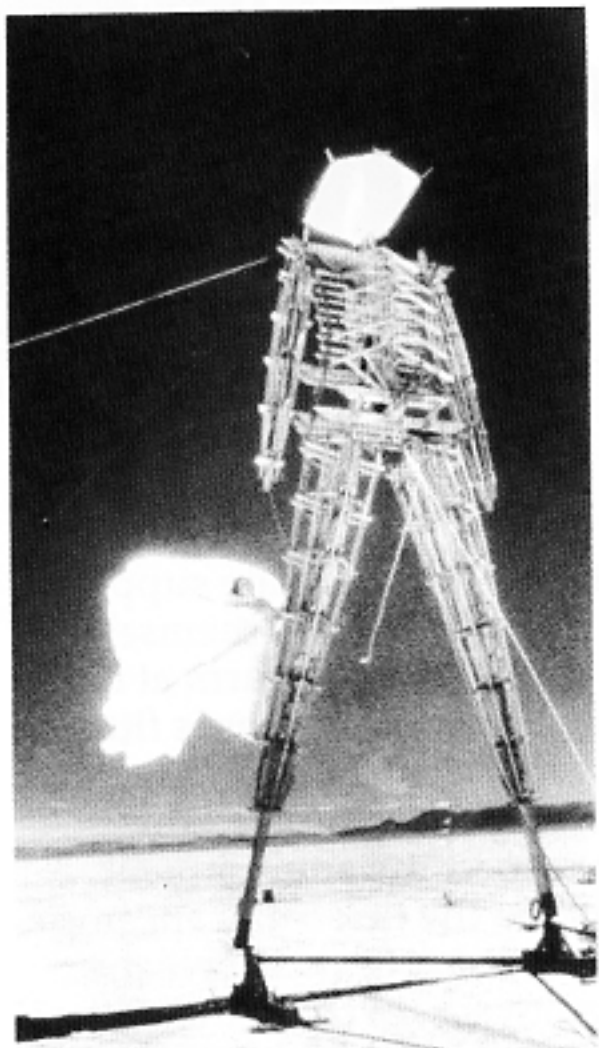
Whether or not they ascribe spiritual significance to it, the Burning Man festival certainly requires a great deal of devotion on the part of the celebrants. The Man himself is a huge construction with its own logistical problems; he must be not only monumental, but mobile. His structural safety is a prime consideration. He is at least as much a work of artisanship as a work of art. Moreover, the festival requires that a temporary community as large as a small town take root in a potentially hostile environment. A measure of responsibility is required of the participants: they

must bring an adequate supply of food and water, keep themselves cool in the day and warm at night. Most important - and as is fitting for a group that aspires to recreate primitive nature rituals - they must respect the environment. Following the three-day encampment all traces of their presence are removed. In fact, in 1990 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) rangers were unable to find the site one week after the event, even the 'burn scar' had vanished.

Whether they see the festival as an artistic event or as a spiritual experience, whether involved in the process of organizing the encampment and building the neon, or just there to participate in the communal ritual, nobody forgets the time they spent at Black Rock with their fellow celebrants hundreds of miles from civilization at the feet of Burning Man.



Stewart Harvey



Stewart Harvey

## GUEST ARTISTS

by Richard Washbourne

*This year, for the first time, the Black Rock festivities will include works and performances by guest artists. In keeping with the festival's tradition of respect for its environment, these works will be site-specific. Some will utilize local materials, all will have been designed with the surreal, empty desert flats in mind.*

Serena de la Hey is coming to Black Rock from Somerset, England - an environment about as different from the Nevada desert as an environment could be. Nevertheless, working with willow, straw, and other natural materials, she will create larger than life figures, site-specific to the playa. Her piece "Wings" was prominently featured at this year's Landscape and Garden Show in April at Fort Mason in San Francisco.

Alex Champion is a local artist who specializes in building mazes

and labyrinths. Using materials from the vicinity of the Black Rock he will create a structure based on a Cretan labyrinth; a design that is common to many cultures (remember the story of the Minotaur?). It is also found in Hopi culture as a symbol of Mother Earth, and on rock carvings in Russia, India and Egypt. You can experience one of Alex's mazes at Lakeside Park by Lake Merrit in Oakland: it is located near the bird sanctuary.

Richard Marriott of the Club Foot Orchestra has developed a number of musical pieces for the Black Rock desert festival. Though inspired by - of all things - a 1922 musical performance by the Soviet Caspian Fleet, his compositions have been designed to take advantage of the peculiar acoustical possibilities that four hundred square miles of empty space provide.

Nevada artists will also be represented by Jim McCormick, chair of the University of Nevada - Reno's (U.N.R.) art department which will display a work which by his own admission, resists description. Consisting of 1000 moveable wood and foam-core modules, the work is reconfigured and retitled every time it is shown in a new environment. Though currently on display in the confines of a gallery, entitled "Vista" and meant as a statement about the human obsession with measuring and dividing, the character of the piece will doubtless undergo a radical change when it is shown outdoors for the first time.

Gregg Schlanger who is also with U.N.R.'s at department will present a new artwork in his "Waterways" series. The new piece has been designed specifically for the Black Rock festival and will - believe it or not - be connected to the camp's shower system.

Finally, for the first time, there will be a Burning Woman at Black

Rock, designed by local sculptor Karen Knoebler. As further news is received on other contributing artists, we will continue reporting in upcoming issues.

## BLACK ROCK TV

by Louis M. Brill

As BURNING MAN returns for another year of celebration, the Black Rock TV (BRTV) unit of video operators is being formed to document BURNING MAN's passage. Coordinated by director Philip Malkin, the crew will form roving field video teams. Malkin plans to produce a 60 minute documentary for world-wide distribution.

Cameras will focus on the Black Rock camp and associated community, all art and sculptural installations, and of course the culminating conflagration at the height of the celebration.

Malkin's plan is to document the desert sojourn in a Hi-8 video format and operations will be centered in a motor home production unit complete with monitoring facilities to review the dailies from each shooting session.

Equipment needs are extensive including the loan of a motor home for the Labor Day weekend, a pick-up truck for use in the desert on field assignments, and the loan of various video gear to support the efforts of documenting BURNING MAN. Volunteers are needed as follows: Camera operators, assistant camera operators, and production assistants.

CONTACT: Philip Malkin (415) 258-1637

*Look for more on Burning Man in the June issue of The City Magazine.*





Stewart Harvey

Music coordinator Bobby Gelman at Black Box. "The desert is a laboratory for psychoacoustics," says Gelman, "The amazing dispersal of sound during the day is replaced by unpredictable projection and reflection effects under the moonlight. The music will amaze you."

## RHYTHM IN THE HEAT

by Bobby Gelman

*From where you stand, it appears that the Earth is a flat disk, a hundred miles across, with a rim of jagged mountains looming sharply at its edge. It's not so much the presence of the sun you feel, but the essence of all the elements in this most elemental world. The ground is a road map of cracked alkali, packed hard enough to sail across. The wind is omnipresent, as it hums past your ears. And the hint of distant voices reminds you of your own small scale in the midst of a universe larger than your imagination.*

You're in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, it's Labor Day weekend, and you are among a great crowd of people from all parts of the West who have come together for the annual fire ritual known as Burning Man.

Artist Larry Harvey has said of the Burning Man metaphor, "it suggests that our most urgent passions are instinct with the energies of nature". As the "performance" of Burning Man has evolved, the truth of this observation has been evidenced by the evolution of a drum accompani-

ment to his raising and burning. It was back in 1989 when Dean Gustafson first provided an improvisational percussion mood to underscore and enhance the primal emotions conjured by the modern ritual. It was this performance, recorded on video, which moved me to propose a further exploration of the connection between this activity and our collective past. Believing the primordial emotions awakened by drumming are in many ways identical to those evoked by fire...what, I wondered would be their combined effect?

Not dissimilar to the groups of tribal drummers cropping up as today's men's movement, the drummers of Burning Man seek to employ a powerful and primitive form of communication. But that's just where it begins. The temporary community which pops up overnight in this harsh landscape is made up of carpenters, computer programmers, bankers, insurance salesmen, and the rest of the lifestyles found in contemporary society. The magic of the place, the simple ritual of working together to create the four-story-tall sculpture, then destroying it by fire, serve to inspire both a common sense of purpose and spontaneous individual expression. That's why the twenty players who pounded

various percussion instruments at the 1991 event sounded like a rehearsed performance troupe (at times), a transplanted ethnic ensemble, and a demonstration of controlled cacophony.

The 1992 Burning Man will again offer the opportunity for the curious, the passionate, and the inhibited to come together in pursuit of this experience. Visitors are encouraged to bring drums of found items likely to make interesting sounds when struck passionately at sundown.

This year, visitors are in store for even bigger treats, as the music and performance program is expanded to include original compositions and performances by members of San Francisco's Clubfoot Orchestra. There will also be specially choreographed dances by performers from Northern and Southern California (yes, Crimson will be back with a new fire dance!)

Burning Man revelers experience swimmable natural hot springs, desert sailing craft, bread baking, showers, an ice-cream social, and the experience of being in a very special place. As the event evolves, more and different types of individuals find in it meaning for themselves. And, we've discovered, they all come back.



- A Project of The LAB  
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## VOLUNTEERS!

We've built a mobile sculpture that stands as a monument to transience. Once the figure is ignited the effects are irreversible. As one participant put it, "A work of art from solid wood, steel, and glass is transformed into vapor, rubble, and memory." The durable part is our ritual effort; this is what sustains the Man's identity from year to year.

-Larry Harvey

Burning Man endures only by your effort. It is, beyond all other things, an intensely participatory experience. Please call (415) 681-3189. We need volunteers in the following areas:

Black Rock Art Festival  
Music  
Bread Making

Construction  
Video  
Transport

Medical  
Costumes  
Administration

This year Burning Man is a project of The LAB, a non-profit arts organization. Materials and services donated to Burning Man are tax deductible.

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### BURNING MAN BLACK ROCK DESERT TRIP - 1992 FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 4 THROUGH MONDAY SEPTEMBER 7

The annual celebration of BURNING MAN will occur over the Labor Day weekend in the Black Rock Desert of Northern Nevada. We are requesting a \$25 donation for each adult attending.

After receipt of registration fees we will forward an event package to you including a schedule of events, a map with directions to our desert information outpost, and detailed instructions on survival, high desert camping and conservation.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Number in party \_\_\_\_\_ (\$25 per adult) \$ \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL FEE: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete, make out check  
and return to:

BURNING MAN/The LAB  
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