

BUILDING BURNING MAN

The Newsletter of the Burning Man Project

Summer 1994

Fire on the playa

by Stuart Mangrum

Picture yourself on the largest flat expanse of land in North America, Nevada's Black Rock Desert. Heat waves shimmer off the hardpan alkali flat, and a fine white dust swirls on the wind. Thunderheads gather over the distant mountains that ring the plain, but the sky above you is a deep, cloudless blue. Behind you is your camp, a Rube Goldberg mix of vans, tents and RVs arrayed in a great circle. Scattered across the plain you see other artifacts less easily explained: a giant fiberglass dog head; an enormous, vaguely phallic mud tower. One of your friends has a radio tuned to the local pirate station; like the daily newspaper folded in your pocket, it will exist only for a few short days and then disappear, like some exotic desert mushroom. You press an icy bottle to your forehead, savoring the cold, and look up. There above you, tall as a four-story building, stands the strangely graceful human figure known as Burning Man.

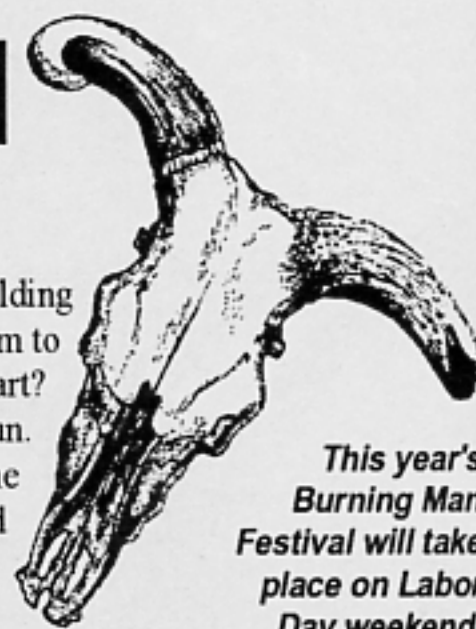
Grabbing a rope, you lend a hand as the Man is lowered to the ground. Final preparations are made, and the crowd swells. Costumed dancers lay down a drum beat as the sky darkens. At last, a signal comes down the line and you haul on your ropes again, raising the Man to his full height, arms outstretched. The drumming intensifies as the sun drops over the horizon, and the Man erupts into flame under a vast and impartial desert sky. One by one, the slim neon tubes illuminating its huge limbs wink out, and carefully concealed explosives add their staccato thunder to the wild rhythm of many drums. Finally, consumed by fire, it collapses to the desert floor, where the wreckage burns long into the night, a bonfire out of some wild primordial dream.

What does it all *mean*? Feel free to ask, but don't expect the same answer twice. Is it a neo-pagan pyro rave or an avant garde art festival? A cyberculture summit meeting or a celebration of the forces of nature? A visionary experiment in temporary community or a post-postmodern weenie roast? Or is it just, as a chemistry grad student from Cal Tech told me last year, "*one hell of a party*?" Personally, I've given up trying to peg it in words. Nowadays, when people ask me about Burning Man, I just say, "*Go*."

Last year, in the space of a few days, I met a journalist from Switzerland, a journeyman carpenter, two tenured college professors, a pagan masseuse from Santa Barbara, a gang of anarcho-feminist writers from Texas, an unemployed gypsum worker from upstate Nevada, and two sisters from Montana who started an

impromptu event in the space between our two cars: molding little human figures out of bread dough and sticking them to bottle rockets, which we then lit and launched. Was it art? Did it mean anything? I don't know, but it was sure fun.

This sort of spontaneous activity is central to the Burning Man experience. Throughout the long weekend people indulge their whims, their fantasies, their creative impulses. If you choose to start something—be it as simple as a card game or as involved as a dada theater piece—someone is bound to join you. Like to dress up in costumes? Fine—bring 'em. Clothes too confining? Likewise no problem. However you choose to express yourself—through visual art, machine art, poetry, music, dance, whatever—you're encouraged to do so in a non-competitive, cooperative environment where distinctions like "professional" and "amateur," "audience" and "spectator" become meaningless, even absurd.



This year's Burning Man Festival will take place on Labor Day weekend, September 2-5, in Nevada's Black Rock Desert. See page 4 for registration materials.



photo: Stewart Harvey

Hauled by many arms, Burning Man rises to his full stature

Burning Man is one of the last places on earth where people from all walks of life, all social strata, and all points of the compass can come together and share an extraordinary experience, a very primal experience: surviving as a group in a challenging environment, creating a temporary culture of their own design, and sharing one of the most elemental experiences of our species, the awesome mystery of fire.

Oh yeah—and it's also one hell of a party. ■

Stuart Mangrum publishes and edits the underground quarterly Twisted Times.

Going to extremes

An Interview With Larry Harvey

By Darryl Van Rhey

DVR: *Burning Man occurs in the middle of a Nevada desert. Just being there is a challenge. Yet hundreds of people attend every year. How do you explain its popularity?*

LH: It's a liberating experience. Black Rock Desert's an entirely empty space—not a bush, a bump, or blade of grass across hundreds of square miles.

It forms a kind of existential void, so anything that *does* exist can have a kind of world-defining power.

A line of sawdust lit on fire, a trail of colored smoke can cause a sensation. Any object there appears momentous. Every gesture seems to reach to the horizon. People find this exhilarating. It's like being a child again and feeling that you're free to recreate the world from your imagination. For three days and nights, Black Rock is transformed into the largest public playground in America.

DVR: *Is that the main attraction; Black Rock as a kind of magic slate, a creative free-for-all?*

LH: I think that's often the initial lure, but there's a second experience that has more to do with why people return.

DVR: *What is that?*

LH: Community. Remember, we're the only things alive out there. People feel nakedly human. Taking refuge from a storm inside a stranger's tent can be a powerful experience. Feeling mortal in a world that's ruled by forces we can't control, and sharing this experience with others,

creates a strong communal sentiment.

I think that's the chief charm of Black Rock: an almost magical personal liberty combining with a

shared struggle to attain the most basic conditions of life. I guess you could say we go to extremes.

DVR: *Couldn't the experiences you're describing happen independently of the Burning Man? What part does he play in this?*

LH: Well, being four stories high, he's easily the tallest object on the playa. Viewed from very far away or really close at hand he seems to be the *only* object on the playa. At night we light its body neon blue. It functions as a beacon that guides people into camp. It's the

ultimate landmark, the center of our world, its final reference point. He looks prodigious when transposed against the overwhelming flatness that surrounds him. It has the impact of a ziggurat or pyramid. He really seems connected to immensities.

What's more, we've designed our ritual to place people in intimate contact with Burning Man, to establish an immediate physical link between themselves and this figure we've built. Watch them pulling on the hauling line that hoists him upward. How did Larry Gallagher describe it [in the September 1993 issue of *Outside Magazine*]? "Eighty sets of arms combine to raise our hero. Eighty sets of legs walk backward toward the setting sun".

DVR: *It sounds like a barn raising.*

LH: It's very like that. It produces a pervasive feeling of connectedness. People feel empowered—after all, it's entirely their energy that's raising him—and since they're joined in one united effort, they also feel connected to each other. When he reaches 45 degrees it's just as if a window had been opened on another world. He suddenly increases in apparent size: he looms. Everyone's connected to a presence that exceeds them—this giant axis which itself connects the earth and sky.

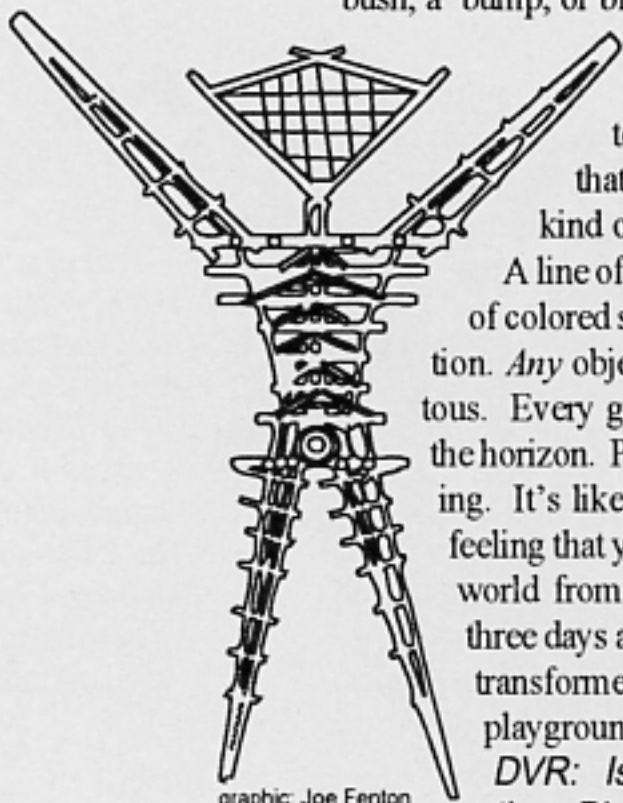
DVR: *What you're describing is transcendence. It sounds serious and spiritual. But, in practice, isn't Burning Man irreverent? This year you're presenting an All-Star Tag-Team wrestling match. I understand you're billing Moses and the Devil as team captains.*

LH: It's a grudge match. The forces of Light and Darkness will struggle at sundown.

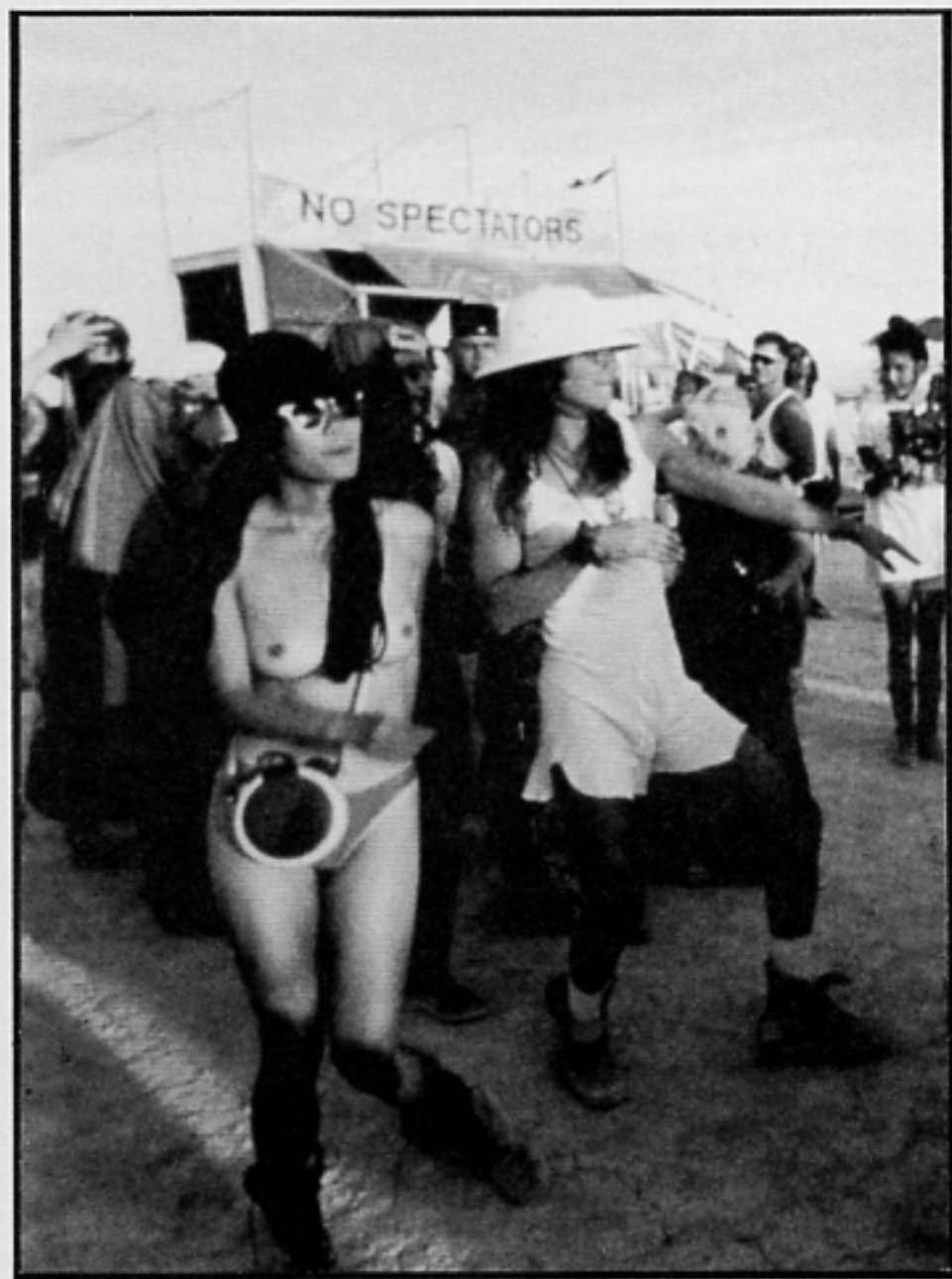
DVR: *I also saw the Java Cow last year. A giant mythological cow dispensing coffee? It filled our cups and asked us, "Do you want cream and sugar?" Our ritual*

response was, "No! We want it black!" It was hilarious—and strangely moving. Here we were at dawn saluting the sun.

LH: Sure, we do a lot of things like that. It's part of an aesthetic of appropriation. We expropriate things from popular culture—the convention of a morning cup of coffee, say, or neon lighting and recycled industrial materials—and give them new expressive form in a communal context. We salvage junk culture. Sometimes the result is absurd, like John Law's giant dachshund head with neon halo—it was salvaged from a Doggie Diner. Just as often the effect is very moving, as you said,



graphic: Joe Fenton



"No audience, only players"

photo: Stewart Harvey

"The Arapaho and Sioux made houses out of hides because that was their material culture. At this point in history, plastic pipe, computers, and recycled rubber are indigenous to ours."

and seems to deepen and redeem otherwise trivial experience. So you liked the Java Cow?

DVR: Yes, I did. But, how are people supposed to know when you're serious? How do you reconcile this odd blend of reverence and ridicule?

LH: There isn't any fundamental conflict. You see, we don't impose interpretations. We've a primary rule on the playa: we never interfere with anyone's immediate experience. We're not burdened by beliefs. No one

Continued next page



Q&A

From the Burning Man hotline... answers to a few of the more common questions regarding the Black Rock Festival:

Q: How far is it to Black Rock?

A: It's about a hundred miles north of Reno—roughly seven hours from San Francisco.

Q: Once I'm in the area, will it be easy to find the site on my own?

A: Not without a map. This year's camp site will be in a different spot than last year's. Once you've pre-registered, we will mail you a map and detailed directions. Do NOT attempt to find us without it.

Q: When does the Man actually burn?

A: At sunset on Sunday night, September 4th.

Q: Where does the money go?

A: Burning Man is 100% participant-funded. Registration fees pay for BLM land use fees, portable toilets, printing, publicity, postage, construction of the Man — everything. With that in mind, please register as early as possible — we need your support.

Q: Is there a special rate for volunteers?

A: Everyone is a volunteer.

Q: I'm a performer — who do I talk to about bringing my act up to the desert?

A: Call the Burning Man hotline at (415) 985-7471

Burning Man plans City visit

On Thursday and Friday evening, August 4th and 5th, Burning Man will come to the SOMAR Gallery at 934 Brannan Street in San Francisco.

The Man will make this rare and ephemeral Bay Area appearance in conjunction with Desert Siteworks, a group of artists who perform annually in the Black Rock Desert. Expect music, dance, sculpture, photographs, paintings, video, performance, and our own unique blend of interactivity. A much-anticipated highlight will be the indoor simulation of a desert storm.

Come in clothing, or any lack thereof, which expresses your relationship to the desert. For show hours, call the Burning Man hotline

as the year progresses.

Artists interested in participating in this event, as well as those who wish to feature artwork at the Burning Man Festival in September or get in touch with Desert Siteworks, should also call our hotline: (415) 985-7471.

We are soliciting "desert survival" stories from all previous Burning Man participants—your account of getting lost or struggling with the elements. Record your 5—10 minute narrative on a cassette tape and mail it to Burning Man, P.O. Box 420572, San Francisco, CA 94142-0572. Please begin with your name or nom de guerre (as in "Call me Ishmael..."). Your story will become part of the show. ■

Experience
Burning Man at
San Francisco's
SOMAR Gallery,
August 4-5, 1994



Java Cow (a.k.a. Kimric Smythe) greets the dawn with a steaming cup'o'Joe

photo: Stewart Harvey

extremes

(Continued)

needs to crouch or be correct or defend some dogma, and this is what makes joking possible, because humor thrives on freedom. The impulse to make fun of anything that *isn't* free is strong in all that desert space. And yet, if humor frees our minds, the actions that we undertake are meant to open people's hearts, probe them in a very immediate way. It's this *experience*, not anyone's interpretation, that feels worthy of devotional respect.

DVR: Does Burning Man represent a return to tribal culture?

LH: Tribal cultures tend to be intensely local, and they center on received traditions that

evolve over very long periods. They're inseparable from time and place. Obviously, you can't just create something like that overnight. I guess the Hippies thought they could, but they also seemed to think they could plug their stereos into redwood trees.

DVR: So this isn't the gathering of a tribe?

LH: Maybe not in a romantic sense, but we've made a living model of the un-selfconscious process that creates such culture. Already, after nine years, we've developed a significant body of tradition—and not the product of a single mind or something drafted by committee, but produced by people who create things, individuals contributing whatever is meaningful to them. Since we encourage work that's interactive, which invites participation, whatever resonates gets taken up by the community. Uniquely expressive acts get transformed and elaborated into social rites,

and through participation they accrue a breadth and depth of meaning which can only be produced in a communal setting. This is how you weave a way of life. It is the primal process by which culture is created. I don't think this is happening in society at large right now.

DVR: So maybe the Hippies were right?

LH: I didn't mean to be so hard on them. Of course they were right. We need an immediate connection to Nature. We need community. We need a counter-culture. But our approach is somewhat different.

DVR: What sort of difference?

LH: For one thing, we're not technophobic. We run a radio station. We desktop publish a desert newspaper. Via short wave, we're plugged into the entire planet. Burning Man himself is focused on a giant lever and the use

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 P.O. Box 420572
 Burning Man Project



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BURNING MAN 1994

INFORMATION/REGISTRATION

Going to extremes

continued from page 3

of fire—what I call primal technology. Ours is a technological society, and why pretend otherwise? *Real* culture is hard-headed in this way. It's based upon survival and uses what materials come readily to hand. The Arapaho and Sioux made houses out of hides because that was *their* material culture. At this point in history, plastic pipe, computers, and recycled rubber are indigenous to ours.

DVR: Yet you said such culture needs a context in time and a

basis in place. This only lasts a few days.

LH: That's true, nor can we possibly live off the land. Yet people have to struggle to survive. Already we're creating a desert-adapted architecture. In a dust storm you've got to live *really* close to the land. Black Rock's an arena ruled by natural forces which demand our close attention. The experience is saturated with a sense of place. Remember too, we're operating in ritual time. During the remainder of the year people absorb the experience, only to return and bring more to it. This intensifies and accelerates the process. A kind of fusion is taking place. Compare it to what happens at the heart of a star. Instead of complex molecules and radiation, we're creating elemental culture. In the darkened world we're living in, I think that's as precious as sunlight.

Larry Harvey is founder and director of the Burning Man Project.

Darryl Van Rhey is an impoverished artist living in San Francisco.



BURNING MAN/BLACK ROCK FESTIVAL

Friday, September 2 through Monday, September 5, 1994

The annual celebration of BURNING MAN will take place over the Labor Day weekend in the Black Rock Desert of Northern Nevada. We are requesting a \$30 donation for each participant 18 years and older to cover event costs.

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

NAME: _____ PHONE: _____

ADDRESS: _____

CITY: _____ STATE: _____ ZIP: _____

NUMBER IN PARTY: _____ X \$30.00 = _____ TOTAL FEE.

Make checks payable to
BURNING MAN.
 Detach this registration form
 and mail, with payment, to:
Burning Man
 Box 420572
 San Francisco, CA 94142-0572

Burning Man is a 100% participant-sponsored event, entirely dependent on your registration fees for funding, so please register early!