

BUILDING / BURNING / MAN

NEWSLETTER OF THE BURNING MAN PROJECT

Summer 1993

BURNING MAN: A HISTORY

by Richard Washbourne

On Labor Day weekend this year, a thousand people or more will travel to the Black Rock Desert in northwest Nevada. They will set up camp upon an alkali playa--the largest flat expanse of land in North America-- and here they will assemble and erect a giant human figure. The next three days will be devoted to ritual, art and celebration. On nightfall of the third day the Man will be slowly lowered to the ground and instilled with fuel. Participants will then re-erect the figure to its full four-story height and, in a climax of music, drumming, and pyrotechnics, dance around the Burning Man as he explodes in flames.

Despite appearances, the Black Rock Festival is not a religious ceremony, even though it draws on the stagecraft of religion. Nor is it merely performance art. Rather, it is something unique that has grown up in the past few years between San Francisco and Nevada; an experiment in building culture and community in the face of a society characterized by passivity and indifference.

Yet back in 1985, when the first Man was burned, no one would have guessed how large the festival would grow over the next eight years, nor how important a part of the Bay Area's cultural life it would become. Its founder, Larry Harvey,



Burning Man illuminated by neon.

photo: George Post

was looking for ways to cheer himself up after the breakup of a relationship. On a whim, he decided it might be fun to celebrate the summer solstice by burning a wooden man on the beach. He called his friend, carpenter Jerry James, and in a couple of hours, they knocked together a figure eight feet tall. Then they gathered a dozen friends, drove down to the beach, poured gasoline over the figure, and burned it. The sight of the Man, arms outstretched, blazing against the night sky, was far more moving than they had anticipated: there was no doubt that the ceremony would take place again.

A NEAR RIOT

Each year the Man grew larger, as did the number of celebrants. The third man was over thirty feet tall and several hundred people attended his torching. Yet the rapid growth of the festival also brought problems. Unsurprisingly, San Francisco fire codes will not allow a giant to be burned in city limits. As a result the fourth Man had to be raised and lit in a hurry, just before the police arrived.

"The experience of working together instilled the figure with an overwhelming reality."

The following year the police arrived in time to stop the burning, which nearly caused a riot. The angry crowd of spectators made a lasting impression on Harvey: "People were screaming at us. It looked like we'd be lynched. Yet what struck me most about this crowd was its passivity. One minute they were about to go on a rampage, the next minute we'd pacified them with a juggling show. Nothing really mattered or meant anything to them except as another distraction, a new thrill. Provided they were being fed entertainment, they were happy."

It occurred to Harvey that the behavior of the crowd was symp-

tomatic of something more general: "Culture and meaning should be something we create through our interactions with one another as we take part in the shared life of a community. But modern society discourages active participation and encourages us to be passive consumers. Instead of a community we've become a mass. As a mass, we don't participate in culture, we consume it. We live together as in isolated stalls. The context of community, the vital interplay of human beings, has been forgotten. What we consume has no inherent meaning or transcendent value to us. It's no surprise we thirst for thrills. Consumption doesn't lead to satisfaction, only more consumption. If we're to break this cycle, we must somehow reclaim community and create culture out of that experience."

"Life seems infinitely precious against that cosmically vast waste."

The festival's organizers now faced two problems: where could they burn the man safely and legally? and: was there any way to make the event more than just another night's entertainment for a bored urban mass? "Originally", says Harvey, "the Man was built and burned by the same small group of people, half of them carpenters. The experience of working together instilled the figure with an overwhelming reality. It grew directly out of us. How, I wondered, could we recapture this immediacy upon a larger scale?" As it happened, Jerry James had attended a sculpture festival in the desert during the previous year. He suggested they take the Man out to Black Rock and burn him there on Labor Day weekend.

DESERT PILGRIMAGE

The desert turned out to be the Man's true home. Standing against the low horizon, he took on prodigious proportions; forming a compelling image of the human presence in this awesome and entirely empty space. According to

Harvey: "Life seems infinitely precious against that cosmically vast waste. Everything that is, is more intensely so." More significantly, the move to the desert transformed the festival from just another public art show into something more ambitious: an attempt to build a model of active community and participatory culture.

Attending the festival now requires commitment on the part of the celebrants. They must drive 300 miles and survive in the desert for three days. Thus they are no longer passive spectators, but active participants united by a common purpose. Moreover, they must build a world together in this challenging environment. For three vivid days and nights on the playa, culture is no longer something passively received through the TV screen, a series of info-bites without context, but is anchored in the collective action, memory and experience of the participants. Every year people add new rituals (all bound up with the practicalities of assembling, raising and igniting the Man) and innovate new performances.

Burning Man is a constantly evolving phenomenon and so each year's festival is different from the last. Each person's time at Black Rock is unique, depending on who one befriends, the adventures that are possible in so vast a space, and how one relates to the surreal desert environment that surrounds the camp. However, one thing is always the same every year: no one forgets the time they spent at Black Rock, and most return the following Labor Day to rebuild the community that has grown up in the shadow and in the glow of the Burning Man. ■

The Burning Man is primarily funded by participant contributions. If you plan to attend, please register early.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN 1993

Upon arriving on the playa, your desert map will guide you to our information outpost, Black Rock Station. Here volunteers will direct you to the Burning Man. (Returning campers be aware: the site the festival has changed! Do not attempt to find our camp unaided.)

Our camp will take the form of an enormous compass (a necessary guide within a landscape devoid of landmarks). At its center we will build a common space where participants can meet, eat, attend lectures, art shows, and performances. This space will be defined by a central structure which will be anchored to the rental truck that brings the Man to Black Rock. It will have two sides, one "sacred", the other "profane". The side of the structure which faces the Man will form a theatrical facade designed as a feminine counterpart to the admittedly phallic figure of the Man. Though looming large, this backdrop will in fact be an illusion: nothing more than a wooden stage flat covered by a quilt cleverly concealing the truck behind it.

Here evening concerts and performances will take place. We will also feature a lecture by Billy Clewlow, U.C. archeologist. In 1981, while prospecting for fossils near the edge of the playa, Clewlow found the largest Mammoth ever discovered in North America. In a lecture titled "Black Rock: The Abyss of Time", he will evoke this vanished lakeside world and describe his continuing search, along the strata of its prehistoric shoreline, for mankind's earliest remains in the Americas.

The side of our central structure that faces away from the Man will function as a combination diner, cabaret and coffeehouse. A newsstand will provide copies of

We invite you to
peruse the morning
paper and sip latté in
the shade.

the Black Rock Gazette, our desert newspaper. Wind permitting, tables with parasols and chairs will be arrayed in front. We invite you to peruse the morning paper and sip latté in the shade. At night, the facade will be illuminated by neon.

Interactive installations and environmental sculptures by

invited artists will be located within the central circle (artists who wish to participate are invited to call the Burning Man hotline). Look for neon, fire-burning fountains, and other surprises. Janet Lohr will conduct a ceramic workshop (fire your work amidst the Man's burning remains!) and, with volunteer participation, we hope to again bake anthropomorphic bread loaves.

Our camp will be connected to the Burning Man by a processional roadway. The figure will be oriented on an axis 15 degrees North of due East. Early risers are encouraged to witness the rising sun as it emerges from between the sculptures outspread legs, traverses its spine, and exits, on its circuit upward, through the top of its head.

We will also have our own radio station, "Black Rock Radio", and a non-confrontational safety patrol, the Black Rock Rangers, acting under the command of the mysterious Danger Ranger. In addition, plans are afoot for at least one collective potluck meal at the central pavilion.

Look for these and many more activities, artists and attractions in the schedule of events included in our registration package. ■





The LAB
 The • Art • Re • Grup, Inc.
 1807 Divisadero Street
 San Francisco, CA 94115

NON-PROFIT
 US POSTAGE
PAID
 PERMIT #1268
 SAN FRANCISCO, CA

VOLUNTEERS!

In the brief span of a few days we will construct a space that is united with the four horizons and connected to the earth and sky upon an axis formed by Burning Man. Within this cosmically dimensioned space we will erect a world, from out of nothing, where it is possible to live and work and act together. To accomplish this formidable task, Burning Man needs your assistance.

Volunteers who contribute 3 - 4 hours of their time will receive a \$15 discount of their \$40 registration fee. *This discount is only available to participants who pre-register.* Here is a list of the departments which need volunteers:

- 1) Administration: help organize volunteers and answer the Burning Man hotline.
- 2) Construction: work with trained crafts people in San Francisco and at Black Rock to build the Man and our camp. *(Members of the advance desert crew will receive free registration. Please call our hotline.)*
- 3) Bread Baking: assemble and preheat a portable retained heat oven and bake bread.
- 4) Quilt: sew together the backdrop which will form the facade of our theater.
- 5) Black Rock Rangers: defuse conflicts, monitor safety, and organize search and rescue parties. Meet Danger Ranger.
- 6) Transportation: provide vehicles to transport materials to Black Rock. *(Anyone willing to haul portable toilets from and to Reno will receive free registration. Please call our hotline.)*
- 7) Black Rock Station: check registration of new arrivals and direct them across the playa to our camp.
- 8) Black Rock Radio: broadcast our live FM radio station.
- 9) Black Rock Gazette: desk top publish and distribute our newspaper.
- 10) Safety Monitors: patrol our safety cordon during the final evenings performance.

For more information call the Burning Man hotline: (415) 985-7471.



REGISTER
 EARLY

BLACK ROCK FESTIVAL - 1993
 FRIDAY SEPTEMBER 3 THROUGH MONDAY SEPTEMBER 6

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 \$40 donation for each participant 18 years and older.

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 _____ (volunteers must include)

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Number in party ____ (\$40 regular rate) \$ _____

____ (\$25 volunteer rate) \$ _____

TOTAL FEE: \$ _____

Please complete, make out check
 and return to:

BURNING MAN/The LAB
 575 Pierce St. #102
 San Francisco, CA 94117