Terminal beach party

By Erik Davis
(abridged from the Village Voice, 10/31/95)

Many moons ago, a crusty old Chinese anarchist wrote that "we shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want." Now I'm standing on clay, a blank 400-square mile alkaline slab in northern Nevada known as the Black Rock Desert. I'm submerged in emptiness. Sixty thousand years ago, this parched playa was Lake Lahontan. Nothing grows on this blazing abstract plain. To run a blade of grass between my toes, I'd have to walk for miles to the mountains that rise in the distance like the edges of a burnished pot.

So what desires will this emptiness hold? That's what me and 4,000 freaks and free thinkers have come to this desolate place to discover. We're here for the annual Black Rock Arts Festival—the atavistic avant-garde neopagan flame-bake better known as Burning Man.

And there's the Man himself, a 40-foot-tall tinfoil giant with a body like an electrical tower and a head like a Japanese lantern. The Man is utterly still in the chaos that swirls below him, as hordes of Left Coast anarchists jerry-press an art but nomad town across the playa: a turbulent array of art cars, RV's, camouflage tents, fake palm trees, generators, flags, fires and candles that evokes some Road Warrior knockoff of Smokey and the Bandit. And the Man watches it all, stoically resigned for Sunday night, when flamethrowers will spit like dragons and he will burn, baby burn.

After helping set up the Spiral Oasis camp with a crew of media bohemians I only vaguely knew, I wandered about aimlessly, marveling at the stunt walkers, the Gothic fire swallowers, the Renaissance Fair dude playing a flute in a storm, I dodged the three-wheeled banana bike, the shark car, the Bug Truck with its score of frozen insects, I thrilled to the Church of Wannabe Noise, the Harpo Marx Memorial Croquet Society, and the Burning Man—Burning Man's queer brother, his wooden west flipped with perfect panache. At the Portland Cacophony Society's Bigfoot Pizza, a song and a dance wins you (literally) a pair of thrift-store shoes. Nearby, curling incense smoke arounds a tyke-high caveman, only one of many swap meet idols (a plastic camel, a monstrous Paisley lizard, a six foot high long lost food wiener dog head) that helped generate Burning Man's curiously neolithic energy. Even the local sheriffs zooming by on their Mad Max mobiles are subsumed in this surreal experiment.

Burning Man is a guerrilla war against alienated spectacle and the commodification of the collective imagination. Sure, someone's selling Burning Man T-shirts and videos, media vampires like CNN and HotWired and me are feeding. But the folks that had poured months of sweat, money and thrift store excavations into their creations were not mugging for cameras—the fruit of their labor was meant to be eaten to the core. This was whatHMey, the great poet of such temporary autonomous zones, calls "immediatism": creative play that subverts its own tendency to stand between us as Art. Like the Pyrodrome fire dancer from Vancouver who would perform until a crowd

Burning Man Hotline:
415.985-7471

Burning Man 1996 will be held in Nevada's Black Rock Desert over Labor Day weekend, August 28th through September 2nd, 1996.

Register before June 1st and save $10!

(see back page for details)
Terminal beach party

(continued)

spontaneously formed about her, at which point she would run away.

Just compare the Burning Man to the Rainbow Gathering, the decades-old hippie bohemian village that plants itself in a natural forest every summer. Drawing from essentially the same core of disaffected middle-class whites, the Gathering similarly emphasizes spontaneous play, wilderness survival, and a lack of concession stands. But while the Gathering immerses itself as an earnest, wattle, and eco-futuristic tribal reunion, the Burning Man is defined by speed, urban elitism, slumming media professionals, and the chaos of technology. The televised view, the cellular monstrosity spitting darts to a roister back in Gerlach, the fiber-optic special effect—out here they speak the truth of our condition far more than any drum circle. “This is like a virtual community without electronics,” said Nick West, an ex Bay Area media artist and four-time Burning Man attendee who teaches at NYU. “It’s a blank slate upon which we write culture. That’s cyberspace at its most utopian.”

But if Burning Man expressed a white-hot culture with its shield down, it also showed how much love lay amid the ruins. As [my friend] Wel put it, “Like the universal heart which can forgive or transcend all petty crime, the desert freed all our manic displays of technology and pyromania with its display of wind and hailstorms and heat.” The first of these fantastic storms gathered to the south late Saturday afternoon, as I danced to DJ Spooky’s dense, angular mix at the booming Wicked camp and watched a train move slowly and lonesome along the base of the cloud-darkened mountains. But even that blast could not beat Sunday afternoon, when everyone at Spinal Osses felt their hair stand on end and the electrical charge in the event tent created audible static. We foolishly clutched our tent poles in the lightning storm, grinning into the ferocious winds that rained hail and blew away everything not weighted down. Afterward, as we skated along the slick clinging mud, a perfect double rainbow unfurled to the east as the storm crafted a 10,000-foot mushroom cloud in its wake. Nature was definitely in the house.

On Sunday afternoon, an impassioned woman took the stage and tried to organize the fire-hungry mob into the proper mood for the Burning of the Man. “There’s a time for anxiety, and a time for focus,” she pleaded. But somehow she went on about “burning up karma” and using Phoenix-like from the Man’s ashes, it was clear that lay ahead was more spectacle than ritual. Not that the devotional parallels weren’t coming fast and thick as I took in the masks and body paint and flags sewn with clips. If you remember that ritual is at least as much performance as narrative, then we’re not so far from the Celtic sacrifices portrayed in the mid-70s pagan thick, the Final Man. Closer still are the old Mediterranean mystery cults of Mithras, Isis, and Eleusis—grand theatrical experiences that overlaid ancient fertility rites and appealed to, as Burning Man participant Darryl Van Rhee pointed out in Gusset magazine, “a sophisticated and self-conscious” urban milieu.

As [Burning Man director] Larry Harvey told me, “We live in a postmodern world. Everything that’s ever happened is happening now, yet nothing is terribly compelling. On the one hand you have immense freedom, on the other hand you have this intense anxiety. Here we’ve resorted to a kind of primal psychology, a level of experience that lies at the heart of all ritual—primordial, prehistoric, preliterate. The genesis of that feeling is standing around a camp fire. You have to reach back that far to find something that’s going to bring people together.”

The change dusty ragged procession that led to the Man differed little from the zillion dusty, ragged processions that have marched through the ages toward a mystery waiting to burn. After a weird little booming jet car zipped around the crowd a few times, the event reverted to a fireworks show where you had to dodge the fireworks. Best was the voice of authority bullhorn behind us: “Your cooperation is no longer required. Please move on. There’s nothing to see here. The Man will burn without you.” The Man did indeed burn, and so many cameras went off it must have looked like St. Elmo’s fire to all the bow-hunters and hermits watching from the hills. Then He was yanked to the ground.

I returned to a camp I’d grown to love, where people I’d probably feel vaguely anxious around amidst the wine and weed at your average redwood deck party—were hanging out in various states of undress, painted with mud, happy. Keith Bontrager, a famous Santa Cruz mountain-bike manufacturer, was tossing thousands of dollars of tweaked magnesium frames onto the fire. Tomorrow their ashes would take a handful of volunteers nearly a week to clean off the playa. But tonight the meal burned with an implacable white light, like the absolute luminescence the Tibetan yogas say awaits us at death, or a snapshot of sunlight, or the first stages of a total meltdown.
Welcome to

"Through me you enter into the city of woe,
Through me you enter into eternal pain,
Through me you enter the population of lost:
Abandon all hope, you who enter here."
— Dante Alighieri

"A true poet is of the Devil's party."
— William Blake

This year in the Black Rock Desert the Burning Man Project presents The Inferno—a rendering of Hell in our Postmodern Age. Throughout history the place we know as Hell has been portrayed in many ways. It is most frequently an after-world, an abode of the dead, and one's journey through it is a trial or initiation. Our own interpretation is adapted from the Hell of Dante Alighieri—the Inferno—as it derives from Hades, the underworld of ancient Greece. Guarded by terrifying monsters—the Furnes, Medusa, and the Minotaur of Crete—it will be a place where every sin and folly of our age is catalogued, held up for public view, and punished. It may also be imagined as a tour of the shadow-self, a surreal probing of the dark Unconscious. Most fundamentally of all, throughout successive ages Hell has been a place of punishment. Whatever we wish to cast out of our world or out of ourselves is here destined to reappear to rise up and confront us. Unlike Heaven, the home of the perfect, Hell is, and will always be, a supremely ironic place.

Our own Inferno, circa 1996, will occur on the night of Saturday, August 31st. It will commence in the center of our central camp circle, the Vestibule of Hell. Our guest host will be Papa Satin, the Infernos' genial pitchman (note: Hell is now known as HELCO since its hostile takeover by a supra-national conglomerate). Papa will light fire as he invites the credulous to sit on his lap. Numerous promotional stems will be featured, including free no-obligation transport directly to Hell in a custom-crafted handbasket.

Towers of Dis (Drawing by Pepe Oscan)

Participants will enter the Inferno through the Gate of Hell and cross the burning waters of the River Phlegethon. Upon its farther shore they must confront Cerberus, Hell's Three-Headed Hound (He is the scourge of gluttons and consumers. His demon servants will be costumed in the garbage that is generated by our camp). Those pilgrims who survive this challenging ordeal will pass into a floating world where visitors drift in darkness like the fragments of a troubled dream. Here pathos, horror, and hilarity will strangely intertwine in a thousand fates on the Plain of Dreams (each site will be a separate installation, a distinct corner of Hell, designed by groups of invited artists). The final destination of our journey will be the hideously beautiful City of Dis. Its somber towers enclose the Ultimate Pit (a hidden and unhealing wound, this chasm is a fountainhead of boundless rage, appalling shame, and unendurable loneliness). Here we'll join together to destroy the Devil and his demons—every ill and evil of the year. The towers of Dis, overcome by a final splendid excess of fire, will collapse into the ground.

The Burning Man Project invites all artists, amateur and professional, to assist us in creating this hellish environment. We are looking for dancers, actors, musicians, singers, puppeteers, builders, painters, costumers, sculptors, experienced pyrotechnicians and performers of every kind—a complete demonic crew to help create and staff the Inferno's featured attractions. Be one of Saturn's sales representatives, help us to design and create the fiery Gate of Hell, assist us as we construct and animate Cerberus, or join in an infernal chorus before the City of Dis. Videographers take note. We are soliciting 2.5 minute advertisements for Hell. These will be featured in our principal San Francisco performance at the SOMAR Gallery this July and will garnish Saturn's throne in the desert. Graphic artists are likewise invited to create small-space display ads for HELCO, to be used in future editions of this newsletter and our on-line daily, the Black Rock Gazette. The Inferno will also present many individual installations on our Plain of Dreams (please contact us with your proposal). Call our Hotline now: 415.985-7471.
Burning Man and Art in the Nineties
A conversation with Larry Harvey

by Darryl Van Rhey

Darryl Van Rhey: The system that has supported Art in America appears to have reached a crisis, patronage is disappearing, galleries are closing, even the NEA is slated for destruction. Yet Burning Man has grown into a large-scale venue for new art. Why is this? How can Art survive the Nineties?

Larry Harvey: Well, I think you're right. The folks upstream have raised their dams. The old patronage system, like so many other hierarchies in American life, is breaking down. Artists are perennial have-nots. I don't think they can expect much in the future, but this may be a blessing in disguise.

DVR: Why?

LH: Because the old system doesn't work. Artists are trapped. Very little money goes directly to creators. Most grant funding goes to institutions from which it trickles down in little dabs and drabs. This is the effect of isolating artists. For one thing, it isolates them from their audience. It's one thing to delight ordinary people with your work; quite another to “delight” a board of directors. Committees aren't creative and bureaucrats aren't a delight, even in their bodies. Institutions, supposedly designed to disseminate art, often become the real clients. There are political tests, peer reviews, the ever-present list for institutional prestige. I'm not saying some deserving work doesn't get funded, but grants and gallery berths are always in short supply. And this, in turn, leads to a second form of isolation. Artists are competing for scarce resources and this isolates them from one another. Everyone is desperate for individual distinction—“Close me, choose me.” It creates a kind of mania. All over the South of Market district in San Francisco, artists are waking up at 3 AM, covered with flop sweat, thinking, “Oh my God, What if I’m derivative?” This is not a creative climate. Collaboration is the soul of culture, but the system divides people.

DVR: What is the alternative?

LH: Populism, an art that is immediately available to large numbers of people. Nothing's going to trickle down. It's time for artists to spread out. We need a broader public.

DVR: What are the characteristics of a populist art?

LH: It is immediate and involving. It breaks down barriers between audience and artwork. It's based upon participation and it contemplates the facts of life. I'll give you an example. Last year Ray Crippino created a public shower for us in the desert. He called it "Water Woman." A stream of water spouted from between its legs. The piece itself was very elegant, but, beyond any question of form, it required an action. It was grounded in need. It was based on survival. People got naked—it was fun and it was funny. Another example is Pepe Ozan. Pepe's based in San Francisco and he heads a group of sculptors. During three successive years they have created large-scale towers—hollow columns, chimneys, really—which they craft from rebar, metal mesh and mud. Last year's version, as it's called, was three stories tall. Pepe's work is quite sensual, very tactile, plastic, elaborately formed. Under any circumstances this would constitute a major achievement, but to stop at the completed product is to miss the point. At our finale Sunday night they filled the tower with firewood. It glowed like molten magma, spotted fireworks, and more than two thousand people, many of them costumed or painted with mud themselves, gathered around it to celebrate. The point I'm making is this: populist art, the kind of art we're creating, conveys society around itself. This goes far beyond the concept of an exhibition. We see thousands of people who normally wouldn't go near a gallery. And this is true for artists also. We give them a community in which to meet and work collaboratively with hundreds of other creators, and with a freedom and at a scale that they can find in no other place.

DVR: We've been talking about the survival of culture, but how does Burning Man promote the survival of individual artists?

LH: Throughout its entire history the Project has operated outside the system. We've struggled unfunded. We have learned to survive.
Visitors to the playa should not come as spectators to a show. Instead, they will encounter an interactive experience; a spontaneous outpouring of energy that is created by our community itself. Burning Man is a phenomenon which springs from your immediate involvement. We are not funded by grants or product endorsements. We depend upon direct contributions. Hundreds of people are now engaged in creating this year’s event. Here is how you can help:

Volunteer
There is only one way to become a member of the Project. You must do something. Burning Man is a society of activists. Later this year we will solicit volunteers to help us run the infrastructure of our camp. We are now recruiting experienced builders, people to do data entry and distribute flyers, help with clerical tasks, and individuals who can assist with transport of materials to Nevada throughout the year. If you have any skill or resource which you think might help us in our preparations, please call our Hotline.

Artists
In addition to the “Inferno” [see previous page], Burning Man is planning many new art initiatives in 1996. Our burning pageant on the desert on Sunday, September 1, will feature large-scale portable effigies that can be raised overhead. Puppeters, model makers, stilts builders, fire performers, etc.—please contact us. We also need help in preparing a large number of plaster brains (yes, brains) that will be featured at our premier show on March 23 at the Minna Street Gallery in San Francisco.

Mudhenge
In 1995 our camp was inundated by a rainstorm and mudpeople sprang from the playa (you know who you are). In 1996 we will construct a tent and public shower in which to house these ripples. We invite all persons of mud to worship, wallow, and bathe between the legs of “Water Woman” (Showers are restricted to initiates. You must first get down in the mud). If you would like to help construct and tend the temple, or wish to organize and schedule an event here (i.e., mud wrestling, a mud procession, etc.) please contact our Hotline.

Public Transit
The playa of the Black Rock Desert is a fundamentally safe environment. Apart from the very real, dire, and life-threatening hazard of becoming lost [please read the Survival Guide that is mailed to all registered participants], the playa is flat and as forgiving as the mattress of a playpen. The greatest hazard that we face is self-created. Nearly every one of the few serious accidents and injuries that we have witnessed during Burning Man has involved automobiles. This year we encourage everyone to bring bicycles. They are perfectly adapted to the hard-packed surface of the playa. We plan also to organize a pool of specially marked bicycles for public use. If you can help us with this effort please call our Hotline.

Film Fest
We are now accepting entries for the 2nd Annual Burning Man Film and Video Festival. The deadline for sub-

Contribute
Send in your registration fee today! By purchasing your ticket now for $25 you can save $10. Beginning in June tickets to the event will cost $35. Buy a t-shirt or video. If you can, you can make an extra contribution (see the check box on your form). Many new projects—Mudhenge, the Inferno, a new public transit project, and an elaborate Man—are being planned for 1996. None of this will happen without your early support. If you are among those people who already know they are coming to Burning Man, help us now.

The burning man t-shirt. Crafted from 100% cotton for cool desert comfort. Screen printed on black in sizes L and XL. Always fashionable; makes a great gift! A substantial portion of the proceeds benefit the Burning Man Project. $15.00 (See back page for order)

The burning man video. Only the finest photons, hand-selected and lovingly preserved on durable magnetic tape for your viewing pleasure. Relive past glories or see what you missed in his 46-minute film by Werta4's Chuck Cirino. A substantial portion of the proceeds benefit Burning Man. $19.95 (See back page for order)

Internet
Like scattered campfires on a dark desert night, the combustive effects of independent web artists illuminate the moonless landscape of cyberspace with images of the Man. In physical space, the fabed city of Black Rock exists only for a week or so each year; in cyberspace it lives year-round at:
http://www.well.com/user/burnman

This volunteer-maintained site contains links to all the pages we are aware of that currently contain Burning Man related material. If you know of any sites that we’ve missed, please contact our webmaster, Jeffrey Gray, via e-mail (vision@well.com).

Obsessors and neophytes are invited to join the ongoing discussion at burnman-list@well.com, an open forum for discussion of BM-related issues. The talk can get pretty fiery, and there is of course the occasional tongue of flame, but what better way to prepare a slice of delicious, refreshing toast? As the event draws closer, the list will become a vital information resource for campers, too.

To subscribe, send an email message with “subscribe burnman-list” as the subject to burnman@well.com

“A play community generally tends to become permanent even after the game is over. The feeling of being "apart together" in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game.”

—Joan Halifax, Homo Ludens
BURNING MAN FESTIVAL
WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 28 THROUGH MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1996

The annual celebration of BURNING MAN will take place over Labor Day weekend in the Black Rock Desert of Northern Nevada. All attendees need to register for the event, and must bring their own shelter, food and water. This form can be used to register and/or order Burning Man merchandise. Feel free to make copies. If you are purchasing tickets you will receive your registration packet (including: 1996 map, survival guide, and schedule of events) approximately one month before the festival.

Tickets: Purchase advance tickets now for Burning Man, August 28 - September 2, 1996. We will mail you a ticket, your survival guide, map, and a detailed schedule of events approximately one month before the event. Order now and save! After June 1st, the price goes up to $35 per person.

Video: Be chased by a giant shark. See visions in a pyramid. Witness a jet-propelled rocket car. These are a few of the scenes you will see in our 48-minute Burning Man video. Price: $19.95

T-shirts: Buy a Burning Man t-shirt. Color on black, available in sizes Large and Extra Large. The image that appears on the shirt is also displayed in the "Survival" section of this publication. Price: $15.00

Make checks payable to BURNING MAN
Detach this form and mail, with payment, to:
Burning Man
P.O. BOX 420572
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94142-0572

NAME: ___________________ PHONE: (______) ___________________
ADDRESS: _______________ ___________________ ___________________
CITY: _______________ STATE: _______________ ZIP: _______________

BURNING MAN VIDEOS
QTY: _______ X $19.95 = $ _______________

BURNING MAN T-SHIRTS
QTY: _______ LARGE _______ EXTRA LARGE
TOTAL SHIRTS QTY: _______ X $15.00 = $ _______________

REGISTRATION TICKETS
NUMBER IN PARTY: _______ X $35.00* = $ _______________

OPTIONAL EXTRA CONTRIBUTION: = $ _______________

TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED = $ _______________

Burning Man is a 100% participant-funded event, entirely dependent on your support.