What is Burning Man?

It's ritualistic, it's anarchic, it's primal, it's a radical communal experiment, it's art, it's the death of art, it's dream-like, it's surreal, it's creative, it's destructive, it's absurd, it's spiritual, it's real.

Think of Burning Man as Disneyland turned inside out. But unlike an escapist fantasy produced by others, Burning Man is not vicarious. At Burning Man you are the fantasy. People do not come to this event to be distracted from themselves; they come here to discover and distill what they uniquely are. We will not tell you what it means, for Burning Man is based on your immediate experience.

There is, of course, the Man. He stands atop a pyramid. He glows at night. He is the landmark that will tell you where you are. He's like the axis of a spinning wheel; the center and the symbol of a world that we create. Or think of him as like a mirror in which you see yourself and others plus something vastly greater than ourselves all imaged as one. Better yet, don't think of him at all. His relevance is purely the result of your participation.

During an extended Labor Day weekend we will construct a temporary city upon the shores of a vanished lake. Serviced by streets, lighted walkways, it's own daily newspaper, and several radio stations, it will become a community peopled by thousands of citizens. While it lasts it forms a great metropolis which floats suspended like a space station amid the vast and empty space of the surrounding desert. And yet, it's great central plaza and canopied towers, it's corner bistro and clubs, it's outfiting neighborhoods and monumental works of art; all of these, like Burning Man himself, are strictly temporary things. Burning Man City is a product of your imagination.

Come prepared to camp here and confront your own survival. Participants in Burning Man achieve identity through what they do. This is a wholly intentional world, a realm of virtual reality to which everyone contributes. We encourage spontaneous performances, costumes, artwork; anything that means what you uniquely are, what you uniquely see, or what you might become. We form a commonwealth of the creative and the desert is a vast blank screen on which reality may be projected. It is a place where the boundary that divides the inner from the outer disappears. What is Burning Man? It's what you make it.

Burning Man is Moving BACK TO THE BEACH

Burning Man began on a beach in San Francisco in 1986. From that birthplace it moved, in 1990, to the equally vast and oceanic space of the Black Rock Desert. In 1997 Burning Man will migrate once again to the nearby shore of Hualapai [WALL-A-PIE] Playa. Named after a now vanished Native American tribe, Hualapai means “people of the pines”. Like Black Rock, this playa is a remnant of the prehistoric inland sea that once was Lake Lahontan.

Our camping ground will be the broad and sweeping plain which parallels the playa. Cattle grazing on this flat plateau reduce it's native grasses to a fine and intermittent haze which seems to hover on the ground. To the east and west it is surrounded by the Calico and Granite mountain ranges, like the floor of a of vast amphitheater; to the north is bordered by Fly Springs. This legendary oasis is composed of seven separate hot-spring pools that are fed by Fly Geyser. Like so many other things at Burning Man, it is a sight so vivid that it seems unreal. Here superheated waters gush in plumes that petrify the landscape into brightly colored terraces of stone. Through special arrangement with the landholder, we will make these pools available to bathers. A small fee, dedicated to protecting and preserving this site, may be charged for their use.

Hualapai Playa itself measures five miles in diameter. It is administered by the Bureau of Land Management, but reachable only through the private land that is our campground. As a condition of entry, we will request that no one drive upon it. It will be designated “No Man's Land” and will belong entirely to pedestrians and works of art. No bus, or dump truck or single blade of grass disturbs this flat expanse, and it will be our playground. Our downtown center will arise

(Continued on next page)
upon the edge of this dry lakebed and it's theme camps will be spread along the "beach". Glittering in the moonless night, our city will resemble some impossibly exotic seaport.

This year signals a return to contact with the natural world. Last year auto traffic in the Black Rock Desert neared a critical mass. The unrestricted use of cars for transportation almost buried our event within a cloud of dust. Reckless drivers threatened everyone. It is our goal in 1997 to reduce this traffic to a minimum. Day visitors, on Sunday, will be asked to leave their cars in our parking lot.

"Last year...reckless drivers threatened everyone. It is our goal in 1997 to reduce this traffic to a minimum."

and campers must agree to park their cars at their campsites, using them only to enter or leave the area. The firm terrain is suitable for trail bikes. Participants will also have the option to camp in a special low density zone located at a distance from our central city.

We have entered a new era. People who return from Burning Man each year internalize it's lessons. Burning Man, the event, has gradually become Burning Man, the phenomenon. The result is a prolific outpouring of energy, a creatively contagious cycle of activity which has spread through San Francisco and across the nation. Upon this fertile ground it seems as if the merest stick, if planted, will grow leaves—and we believe our new land in the desert is potentially a year-round home for many of these efforts. We envision a place where prodigious works of art can coexist with equally prodigious works of nature. We see it as a meeting ground for the community of Burning Man. Join us for our founding rites in 1997 and say, in years to come, that you were there.
Promised Land
AN INTERVIEW WITH LARRY HARVEY

Darryl Van Rhey: Burning Man is moving to a new location. How will it be different?

Larry Harvey: Our community will have a defining perimeter. We are moving from the illimitable space of the Black Rock Desert to terra firma. This place has the permanency of real land. Until now we have floated in nothing.

DVR: But wasn’t that its charm— the feeling that it had no context, that everything was somehow generated by us, magically the result of our presence alone?

LH: It will still be largely like that. Hualapai is wide and flat and empty. If, for instance, you dropped our central camp, the core of last year’s settlement, onto our new site, it would be like placing a dime on a dollar bill. There is plenty of room. We’re camp-

“Everything will exist at a pedestrian scale. This playa, in a way, will seem larger and our experience of Nature more immediate.”

ing on a huge plain. Yet, in a way, you’re right: it’s not so absolutely empty as before — but I welcome this change. Black Rock drew us together, made us huddle in a profoundly inhuman environment. It was, I’ve always said, like outer space, and this experience made us intensely aware of one another. All that nothing forged a primal bond between us. Yet now, having grown more conscious of ourselves as a community, it’s time to assume more responsibility for what we are—and our new home will make this possible. We’re like a baby, really, that takes it’s first steps. The beach where we began was like a nursery. Think of Black Rock as a sort of kindergarten. If we haven’t learned the moral lessons that it had to teach us, what’s the point? We’d reached an order of magnitude that requires more cooperation. The liberty to do anything had begun to infringe upon the freedom that had drawn us to the desert in the first place. Liberty is something you enjoy alone, but freedom is a state that’s shared with others.

DVR: How will the new site promote community?

LH: First, it will make the environment safer and, at the same time, more accessible. Last year it was possible to live in Black Rock City, yet never really see the virgin desert if you traveled on foot. We were swamped in our own suburbs. Even if you did walk through that open space at night you ran the risk of being run down by a car. There were too many people in an unmarked trackless environment driving too many motorized vehicles. It actually restricted our freedom. This year we’ll camp on the shore of a playa and leave the pristine desert clear of everything but art. People can camp next to their cars, but the playa and our campground will be reserved for foot traffic. Everything will exist at a pedestrian scale. This playa, in a way, will seem larger and our experience of Nature more immedi-

DVR: What do you mean by a “skin”?

LH: Every community has one—some sort of semi-permeable membrane that protects it and preserves the integrity of it’s process. This is another lesson we’ve learned.

DVR: Does that mean you want to exclude certain people?

LH: No, not specifically. Burning Man is radically inclusive and always will be. It does mean, however, that we need to be selectively inclusive. To exclude anyone on the basis of a prejudicial preconception is invidious and wrong. Burning Man is about whatever we have primally in common, but we do need to discriminate in a positive way. We need to select for a higher level of commitment. Now we can ensure that anyone who comes to Burning Man is ready to contribute. Now we can educate newcomers. The growing presence of casual tourists in cars was becoming disruptive. It’s not that these people are bad or belong to some evil group. It’s that they haven’t any context for their experience. It’s much too easy for them to see the event as mere spectacle, but Burning Man isn’t something you can experience passively.

Larry Harvey is the founder and director of the Burning Man Project. Darryl Van Rhey is a free-lance writer living in San Francisco. An article by Mr. Van Rhey, “Burning Man: A Post-Modern Mystery”, appears in this edition of the newsletter.
The Secret Rites Of Burning Man
SOMA Gallery 934 Brannan Street,
San Francisco
Friday and Saturday
June 20 & 21 AND 27 & 28
8:00 - 12:00 P.M. $10 Admission

Mysteria

Our San Francisco show in 1997 is called "Mysteria". Translated from the Greek, it means "initiation". Participating artists are invited to create a mystery cult-some rite of passage that reveals a visionary secret. Such secrets will be closely guarded. Only members of our audience who undergo initiations can become Illuminati. Help Burning Man put the cult back into culture.

Help Create Mysteria
Attend our Artist Meeting
SOMA Gallery, 1111 Minna St.
in San Francisco, on Sunday, April 6
from 3PM until 7PM.

We can't reveal the secret of our featured presentation, "The Burning Man Mythos", except to hint that it involves the greatest mystery of them all - fertility and sex. Burning Man's sub-cults in 1997 will have a predominantly female character. Expect the advent of Caelus Mistress Gaia (with her subservient court of vegetables). Anticipate also The Secret Rites of Bacchus (and the creation of Ken). Burning Man himself, of course, be present, accompanied by a lingum fountain spouting unpasteurized milk. The following article, abridged and amended, first appeared in the Summer 1995 edition of Gnosis Magazine.

BURNING MAN: A POST-MODERN MYSTERY

Organizers of Burning Man abdicate the meaning of this celebration in a cloud of calculated ambiguity. Pressed to explain their intentions, they cite a simple doctrine. "The Project," one is told, "never interferes with anyone's immediate experience." Participants are urged to create their own meaning through participation. The event might be described as an avant-garde art festival, a ritual enactment of creation and destruction, or an exotie free-wheeling party. Yet to the student of religion, these activities suggest a time, a place, and a social setting that has precedents in ancient history.

Throughout the classical period of Western civilization, there existed a diverse spiritual movement that is known as mystery religion. The mystery cults, as they were called, arose within a new world order. The conquests of Alexander and the subsequent spread of Roman rule throughout the Mediterranean world had greatly expanded the scope of classical civilization. Stretching from the shores of the Atlantic to the Caspian Sea, it occupied a vast cosmopolitan domain, teeming with commerce and hosting the ideas of many cultures. Immense allocations of men and monies had displaced entire populations. The citizenry of the empire, uprooted and heterogeneous, now congregated in large urban centers, and within this sophisticated and self-conscious setting, huge societal gaps now separated rich from poor and urban from rural populations. It was world, in other words, remarkably like our own.

Arising from this complex milieu, the mysteries derived from diverse sources. Traditions drawn from many cultures flowed like tributary streams into the great Mediterranean basin, bringing with them the worship of Isis and Osiris of Egypt, Mithra of Persia, and the Anatolian Great Mother. Yet the mystery cults had much in common. All were grafted to the stock of agrarian fertility festivals - relics of a prehistoric past - yet were essentially urban in character. They typically employed theatrical parades and pageants to attract a pool of individuals who might share little else in common, and they were organized as lodges. Membership within a cult implied a broad equality with fellow mystai or initiates.

Ceremonies often took the form of pilgrimages. Participants removed themselves to sacred sites. Mysterai sang and danced to flute and symbol; others wore masks and sported strange attire. Such celebrations might take many days, and while they lasted, class distinctions were dissolved. "Persons who are being initiated into the mysteries throng together at the outset amid tumult and shouting," wrote Plutarch of the Eleusinian Mysteries celebrated near Athens, "but when the holy rites are being disclosed and performed, the people are immediately attentive in awe and silence."

Such initiations were performed by firelight at night in enactment of a central myth of death and rebirth. They were often highly theatrical performances and, unlike the tribal traditions from which they sprang, placed unique emphasis on personal choice. Many people probably attended the festivals simply to have fun. Intense, ecstatic, and immediate, these rites did not stress doctrinal belief, but valued outward show and inward feeling. Aristotle states the mysteries weren't about a teaching; they were initiations focused on direct experience.

The mystery cults, long a dominant form of worship in the late classical world, perished with the fall of Greco-Roman civilization. Yet the modern immersion of the Burning Man, surrounded by impromptu rites of celebration, forms an arresting analogy. The parallels are striking: fire, sacrifice, pilgrimage, visionary spectacle, egalitarianism, revelry, recruitment from an urban population, direct experience as opposed to doctrinal belief, and, central to it all, a myth of death and regeneration. Functionally, Burning Man appears to be a form of mystery cult. Perhaps the only fundamental difference between this event and its ancient predecessors is the absence of a supernatural context. Post-modern irony, not superstition, rules the rites of Burning Man. It's nascent myths are mostly borrowed, with a sly appropriative flair, from the stock of pop culture, and Burning Man himself, in an existential twist, is very clearly the creation of his devotees themselves.

Organizers of this modern mystery disclaim any conscious plan to reproduce the past and relentlessly satirize the metaphysical claims of Religion. Yet it may be that culture is adapting to the changing needs of our society. As anyone who studies ritual will understand, the past and future are united on a single wheel in time.

-Darryl Van Rhee
Survival

The registration fee for Burning Man is going up!
Here are the answers to a few questions.

DOESN'T BURNING MAN MAKE A LOT OF MONEY?

Burning Man does not make as much money as you might think. Many people make an easy calculation. Their reasoning follows: If a reported 10,000 people attended our event in 1996 at an average of $35 per person, then Burning Man must have raised more than one third of a million dollars; a vast sum. This figure is erroneous for three reasons. First, the figure of 10,000 people is only a loose estimate of our total attendance on Sunday afternoon, the night of the Burn. This includes many hundreds of people who have streamed onto the playa from surrounding counties to witness our final event. These individuals have paid nothing. Secondly, more than a third of the participants have evaded our gate. Entry to the Black Rock Desert can be gained at several points and each year a small army of the canny, cunning and unscrupulous have taken advantage of this fact. Lastly, many people have paid less than the stated admission fee at our gate or paid nothing at all. We are not legally empowered to refuse anyone direct entry onto public lands.

WHERE ARE THE PROFITS?

There are no profits. The Burning Man Project finished 1996 more than $30,000 in debt. Our staff has gone unpaid. Burning Man has never been run as a normal profit making enterprise. Similar festivals reap their profit from concessions, but Burning Man purposely creates a commerce-free zone. Where else in North America is it possible to attend a mass gathering at which the principal activity is not the consumption of goods, services, or paid entertainment? The one concession we have sponsored, apart from the very sporadic sale of souvenir shirts, has been our coffeehouse in Central Camp, and it's primary purpose is social registration has increased to $50. As of June 1997, the fee will be $65. Possible restrictions on attendance permitting, we will charge participants $75 at our site in the desert. However, we encourage everyone to register early. Space at our new site to attend all may be limited! The price of a ticket to our five-day event has always been remarkably low. Consider: $50 is what you might pay for one night's stay at a motel complete with midget soap bar, a picture of

WHY IS THE PRICE OF A TICKET INCREASING?

The price of a ticket to Burning Man has doubled from last year. The price for early

Here is a breakdown of our expenditures in 1996:

- Camp Construct $16,14
- Cleanup $14,78
- Art Projects $14,21
- Staff Expenses $11,62
- Federal Fees $9,98
- Communications $8,17
- Transportation $7,76
- Safety $5,94
- Office $5,88
- Insurance $0.33

Burning Man for every participant who attends our festival.

HOW CAN I CONTRIBUTE?

Send in your $50 registration fee today! Make an OPTIONAL EXTRA CONTRIBUTION and we will thank you by listing your name with your permission in our summer (June) newsletter. Buy a Burning Man t-shirt or cap. Copy this newsletter and pass it on to your friends. We also need volunteers. Have you clerical or organizational skills? Can you help with construction? Are you planning a theme camp or large art project? Do you have access to services or materials? There are hundreds of tasks which sustain our community. If you think you can help us, please call our Hotline: (415) 985-7471. You may also contact our website: burningman.com The Burning Man Project is a society of activists. Join us!
**BURNING MAN FESTIVAL**  
**WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 27 THROUGH MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 1997**

The annual celebration of BURNING MAN will take place over the Labor Day weekend at Haulapai [WALL-A-FIE] Playa in Northern Nevada. This form can be used to register for the festival and/or order Burning Man merchandise. Feel free to make copies. If you are purchasing tickets you will receive your registration packet (including ticket; 1997 map, survival guide, and schedule of events) approximately one month before the event.

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**ORDER YOUR TICKETS NOW. SPACE TO ATTENDANTS MAY BE LIMITED.**

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* Standard price after June 1, 1997. Special offers and/or other discounts may apply. Please check the Burning Man website for more information.

**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

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