

B U I L D I N G

The Journal of the Burning Man Project

Spring 1996

Burning Man

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 plane. 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 freethinkers 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 timber 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-build an art brut nomad town across the playa: a turbulent array of art cars, RVs, camouflage nets, fake palm trees, generators, flags, fires and candelabras that evolves like some Road Warrior knockoff of SimCity. And the Man watches over 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 stilt walkers, the Goth fire swallows, the Renaissance Faire 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 Warm Noise, the Harpo Marx Memorial Croquet Society, and the Flaming Man—Burning Man's queer brother, his wooden wrist flipped with perfect panache. At the Portland Cacophony Society's Bigfoot Plaza, a song and a dance wins you (literally) a pair of thrift-store shoes. Nearby, curling incense smoke anoints a tyke-high carven caveman, only one of many swap meet idols (a plastic camel, a monstrous Paisley lizard, a six-foot-high fast-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.

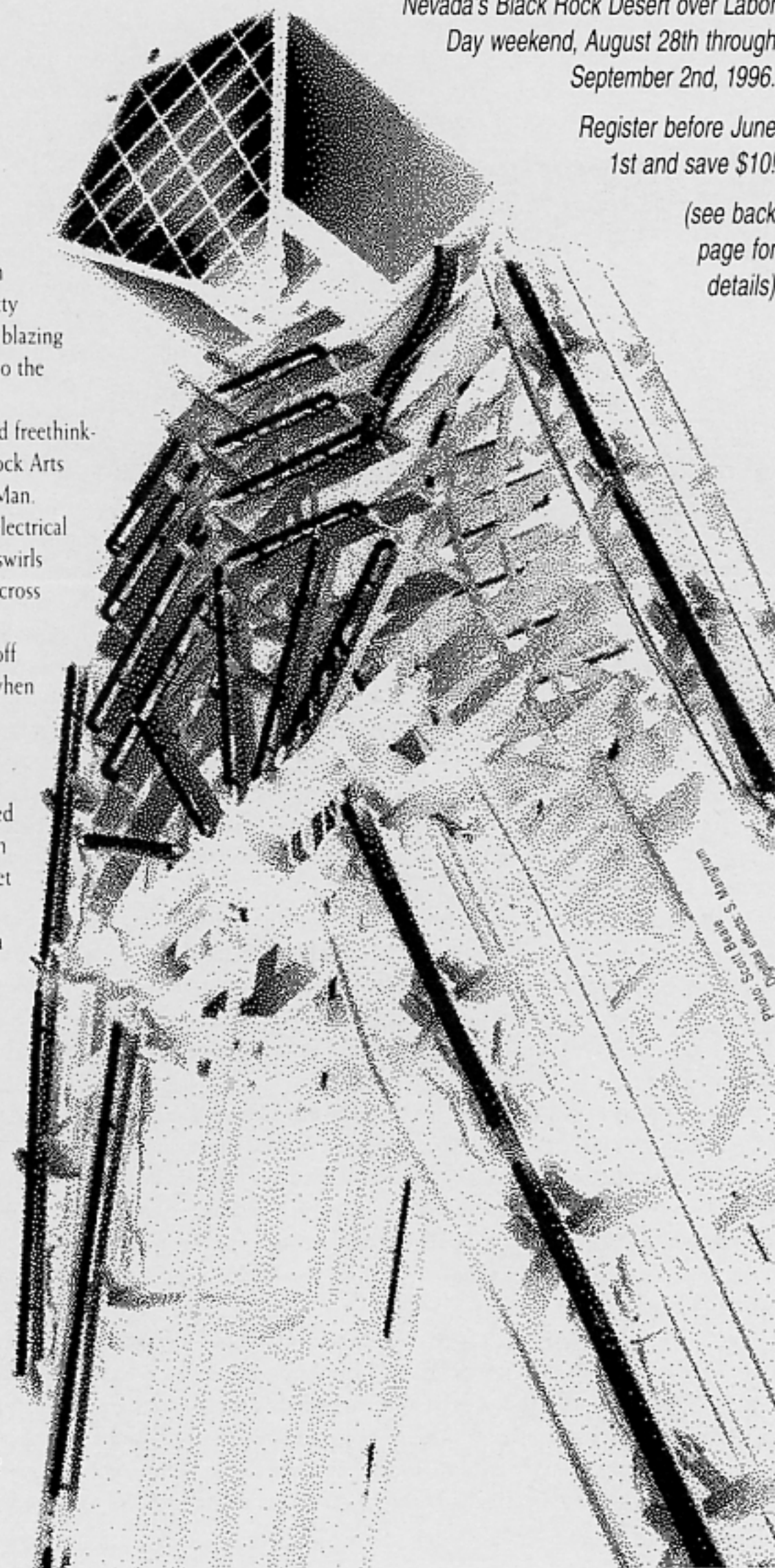
Burning Man is a guerrilla war against alienated spectacle and the commodification of the collective imagination. Sure, someone was selling Burning Man T-shirts and videos, media vampires like CNN and HotWired and me were feeding. But the folks that had poured months of sweat, money, and thrift store excavations into their creations were not mugging for cameras—the fruit of their labor was meant to be eaten to the core. This was what Hakim Bey, 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 Pyrodesiac fire dancer from Vancouver who would perform until a crowd

—continued on page 2

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)



Burning Man Hotline:
415.985-7471

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 no-mad village that plants itself in a national 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 imagines itself as an earnest, Luddite, and eco-utopian tribal reunion, the Burning Man is defined by speed, urban detritus, slumming media professionals, and the chaos of technology. The tweaked video, the cellular modems spitting digits to a router back in Gerlach, the fiber-optic special effects—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 shields down, it also showed how much love lay amid the ruins. As [my friend] Wef put it, "Like the universal heart which can forgive or transcend all petty crime, the desert dwarfed 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 slow and lonesome along the base of the cloud-darkened mountains. But even that blast could not beat Sunday afternoon's, when everyone at Spiral Oasis 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 lightening 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 40,000-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 anarchy, and a time for focus," she pleaded. But however much she went on about "burning up karma" and rising Phoenix-like from the Man's ashes, it was clear that what 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 sigils. If you remember that ritual is at least as much performance



Photo: Barb Traub

"Nature was definitely in the house"

as narrative, then we're not so far from the Celtic sacrifices portrayed in the mid-'70s pagan flick *The Wicker Man*. Closer still are the old Mediterranean mystery cults of Mithras, Isis, and Eleusis—primal theatrical experiences that overlaid ancient fertility rites and appealed to, as Burning Man participant Darryl Van Rhey pointed out in *Gnosis* 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 anomie. Here we've resorted to a kind of primal psychology, a level of experience that lies at the heart of all ritual—primordial, preverbal, prehistoric. 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 clanging dusty ragged procession that led to the Man differed little from the zillion clanging dusty ragged processions that have marched through the ages toward a mystery waiting to burn. After a weird little booming jet car zoomed 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 about 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 metal burned with an implacable white light, like the absolute luminescence the Tibetan yogis say awaits us at death, or a snapshot of starlight, or the first stages of a total meltdown.



Burning Man Presents

BEYOND BELIEF

*Balanced at the borderline
where what we think is Art meets
what we think is Religion*

MINNA STREET GALLERY

111 MINNA STREET
SAN FRANCISCO
SATURDAY, MARCH 23
8:00-12:00 P.M.
\$8 ADMISSION

Help us liberate a city street (Minna alley, between 2nd & New Montgomery). Join us for an evening of the spectral, the iconic, the surreal, and the absurd; interactive ritual for the 21st Century.

Minna Street Gallery will also host an ongoing show of sculpture and photography generated by the Burning Man experience. No-host bar. Lectures, video, meetings, and performances will be scheduled after March 23, through April 26.

Check our Hotline for details:
415.985-7471

B U I L D I N G Burning Man

The Journal of the Burning Man Project
SPRING 1996

Editor: Stuart Mangrum
Photos: Scott Beale, Stewart Harvey, Barb Traub
Thanks: Erik Davis, The Village Voice, Pepe Ozan,
Paizley Hayes, Darryl Van Rhey
Website: <http://www.well.com/user/burnman>
Correspondence: The Burning Man Project
P.O. Box 420572, SF CA 94142
Burning Man Hotline: (415) 985-7471

© 1996 The Burning Man Project • Department of Information Services

Welcome to

"Through me you enter into the city of woes,
Through me you enter into eternal pain,
Through me you enter the population of loss.
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 Furies, 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 banishment. 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.

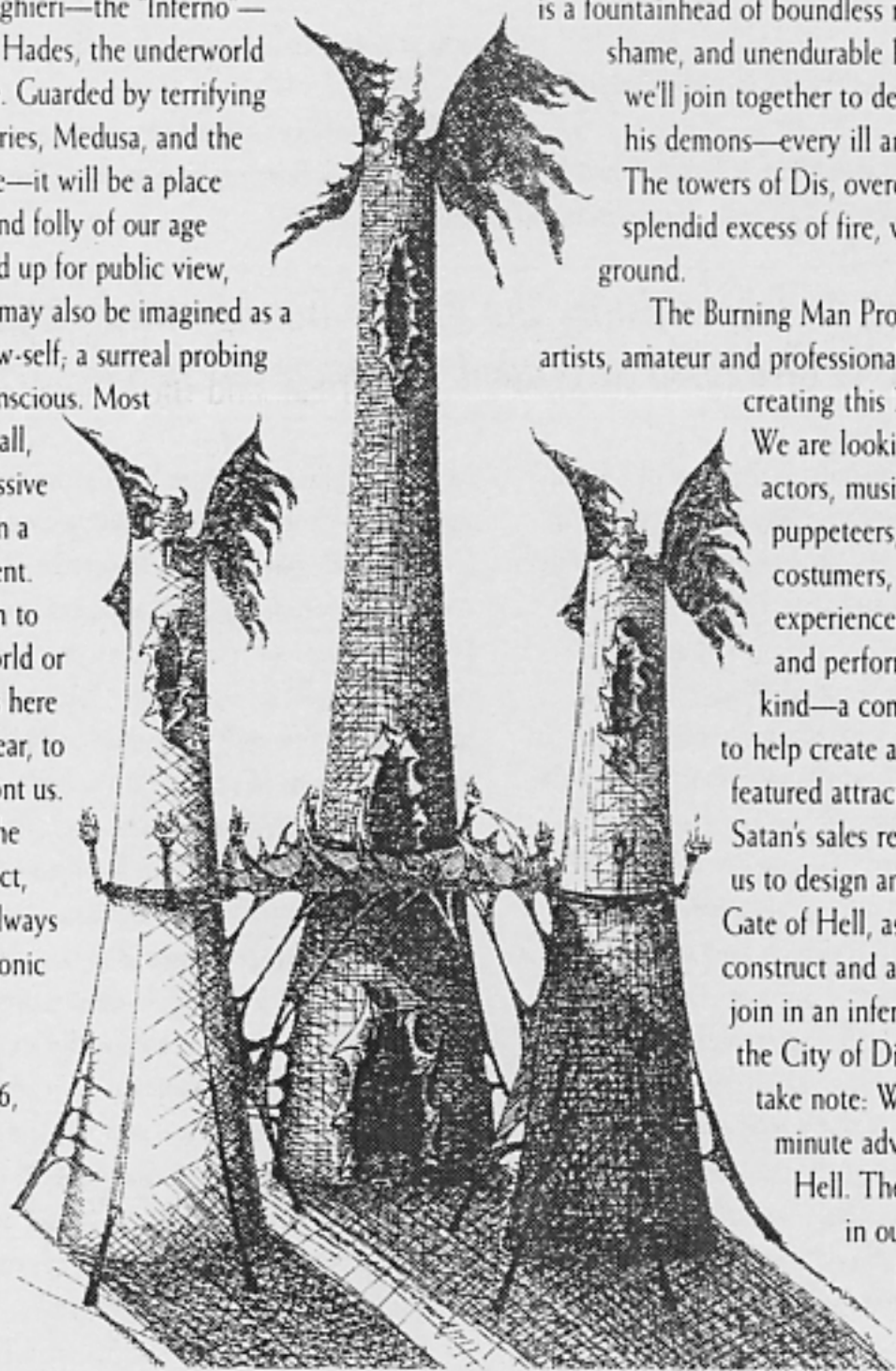
Our own Inferno, circa 1996, will occur on the night of Saturday, August 31st. It will commence in the center of our central camp circle, the Vestibule of Hell. Our guest host will be Papa Satan, the Inferno's genial pitchman (note: Hell is now known as HELCO since its hostile takeover by a supra-national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

Participants will enter the Inferno through the Gate of Hell and cross the burning waters of the River Phlegathon. 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 visions drift in darkness like the fragments of a troubled dream. Here pathos, horror, and hilarity will strangely intermingle in a hundred fires 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.

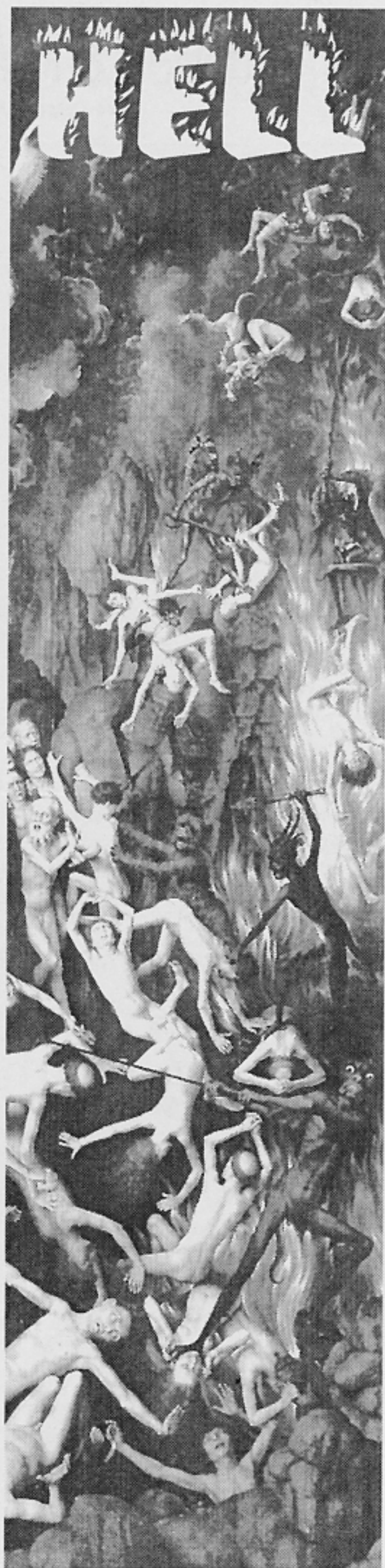
The Burning Man Project invites all artists, amateur and professional, to assist us in creating this hellish environment. We are looking for dancers, actors, musicians, singers, puppeteers, builders, painters, costumers, sculptors, experienced pyrotechnicians and performers of every kind—a complete demonic crew to help create and staff the Inferno's featured attractions. Be one of Satan'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 Satan'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 onsite 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.



Towers of Dis (Drawing by Pepe Ozan)



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 there it trickles down in little dribs and drabs. This has 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 bureaucracies haven't a delightful bone in their bodies. Institutions, supposedly designed to disseminate art, often become the real clients. There are political tests, peer reviews, and the ever-present lust 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—"Choose me! Choose me!" It creates a kind of mania. All over the South of Market district in San Francisco, artists are waking up a 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

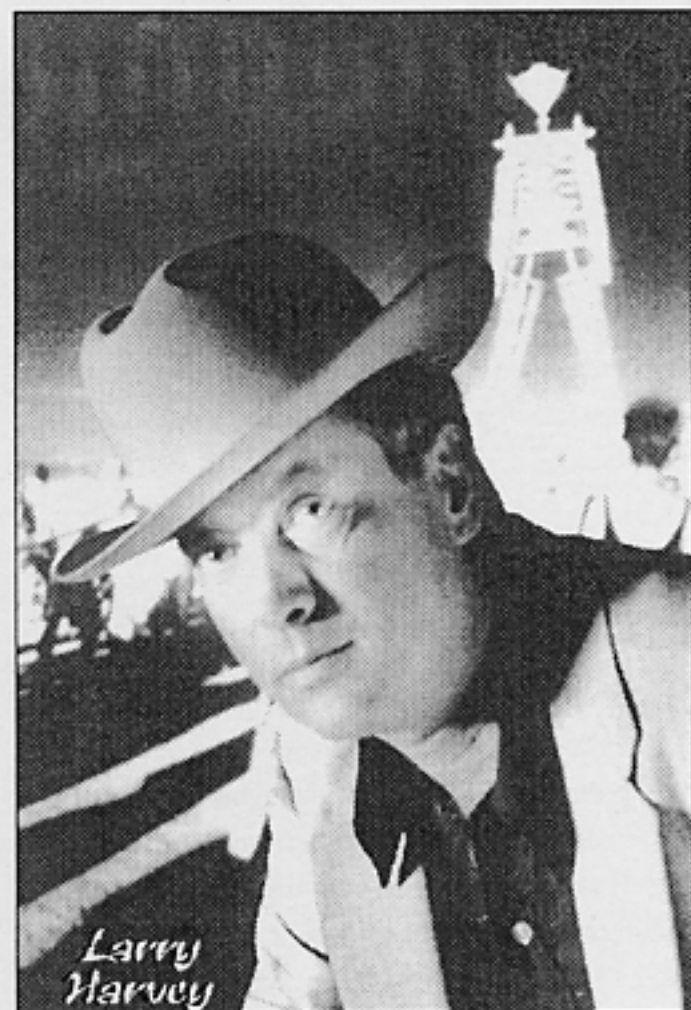


Photo: Stewart Harvey

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?

"Throughout its entire history the Project has operated outside the system. We've struggled unfunded. We have learned to survive."

participation and it contemplates the facts of life. I'll give you an example. Last year Ray Cirino 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 leads a troupe 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 lingam, as it's called, was three stories tall. Pepe's work is quite sensuous, 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, spouted 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, convenes 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

LH: Throughout its entire history the Project has operated outside the system. We've struggled unfunded. We have learned to survive. What we've created is a forum where creators can connect and learn from our example and from one another. For one thing, we attract a huge public, thousands of participants. Remotely, through the media, this includes millions of people. We've been on CNN and we've been featured in the New York Times Magazine, the Village Voice—perhaps a hundred other periodicals. At our Website we've connected to 1,500 people a day and we're organizing a gallery on the Internet that will feature individual artists. I think this offers a way out, a way to escape the art ghetto—what Tom Wolfe called "Cultureburg": a smallish self-regarding town of galleries, patrons, and art administrators. I believe that what we're doing is a model for the future, that it will spread by example and create new venues, a new kind of environment for work that includes a much larger public. The reason for our exponential growth is that we offer people something that they can find nowhere else. We're reclaiming the social function of art and that's a very powerful attractant. I want artists to come out and absorb the ethos and the style we've invented. After all, what have they really got to lose?



Larry Harvey is the founder and director of the Burning Man Project. Darryl Van Rhey is a journalist living in San Francisco.

Photo: Stewart Harvey



Ray Cirino's *Water Woman*

Survival

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:

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 a video. If you can, make an extra contribution (see the check box on order form). Many new projects—Mudhenge, the Inferno, a new public transit project, and an elaborated Man—are being readied 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*.

"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."

—J. Huizinga. *Homo Ludens*

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 in the desert on Sunday, September 1, will feature large-scale portable effigies that can be raised overhead. Puppeteers, model makers, stilt walkers, fire performers, etc.—please contact us. We also need folks to assist us in casting 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.

MUDHENG

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 temple and public shower in which to house these rites. 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 as 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-

THE BURNING MAN T-SHIRT: Crafted from 100% cloth 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 to order)

missions is July 4th. Please contact Coffee Achievers at 415.826-3277. Ask for Hernan.

SETTLEMENT

This year, the city of Black Rock will sport a newly renovated downtown area and a number of exurban hubs, or "meta-theme camps." If you want to create your own city within a city, call the Hotline.

INTERNET

Like scattered campfires on a dark desert night, the combusive efforts of independent web artists illuminate the moonless landscape of cyberspace with images of the Man. In physical space, the fabled city of Black Rock exists only for a week or so each year; in cyberspace it lives year-round at:

<http://www.well/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 alike 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 carpooling leads, weather updates, and last-minute news. To subscribe, send an email message with "subscribe burnman-list" as the subject to burnman@well.com

THE BURNING MAN VIDEO: Only the finest photons, hand-selected and lovingly preserved on durable magnetic tape for your viewing pleasure. Relive



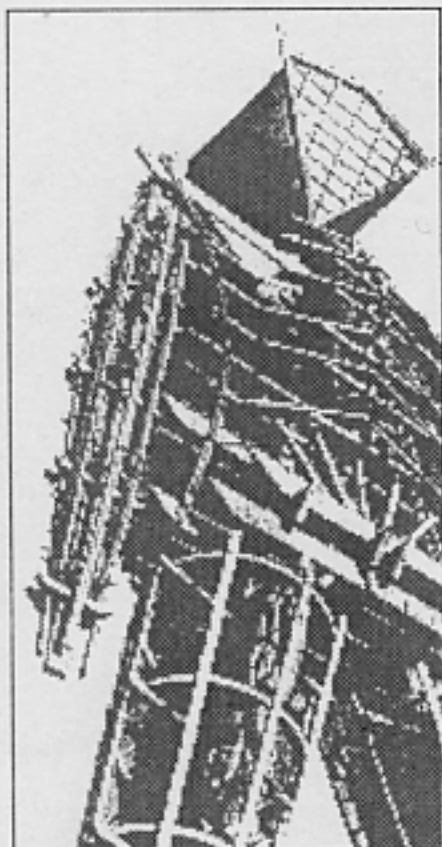
past glories or see what you missed in this 48-minute film by WeirTV's Chuck Cirino. A substantial portion of the proceeds benefit Burning Man.

\$19.95

(See back page to order)

Burning Man Project
P.O. Box 420572
San Francisco, CA 94142-0572

BULK RATE
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 3640
SAN FRANCISCO, CA



BURNING MAN '96

BLACK ROCK CITY • NEVADA • USA
(415) 985-7471 • WWW.WELL.COM/USER/BURNMAN

Burning Man 1996
REGISTRATION
MATERIALS

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

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* = \$ _____

*Standard price after June 1, 1996. Special Offer: Send in your order before June 1, 1996 and pay only \$25.00 per person!

OPTIONAL EXTRA CONTRIBUTION: _____ = \$ _____

TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED _____ = \$ _____

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.