



# The Art of Burning Man

by  
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**W**hatever Burning Man is, it is getting bigger. In 1997, 8,000 people hauled their bodies to the empty Nevada desert and made an instant city. In 1998 it was 14,000. This past summer, 23,000. Next year?

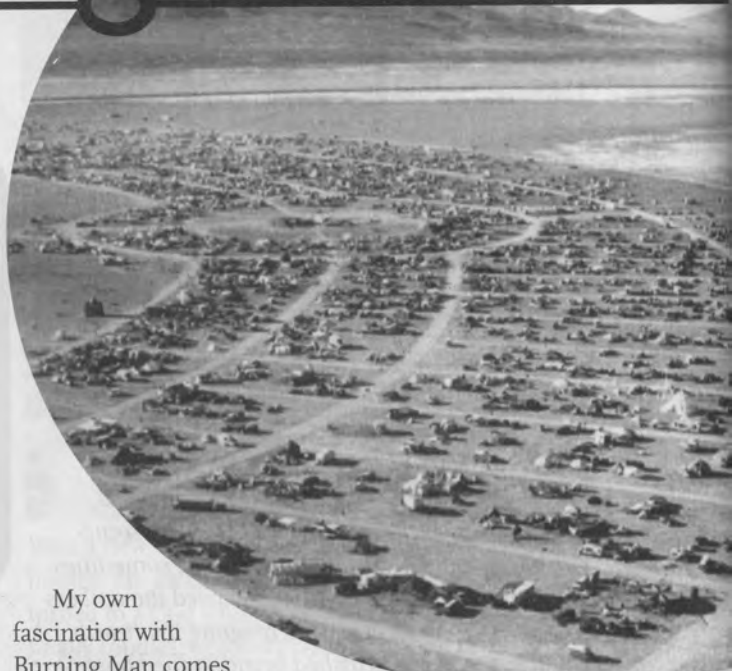
Black Rock City, as the town centered around Burning Man is known, is now the third largest city in Nevada, although it exists for only one week a year. It is also perhaps one of the best-designed cities in the world. It works wonderfully. It's safe enough for women to walk around naked. It's chock full of fantastic and real art. Transportation is primarily via bicycle. It's got a world-class view of a unique wilderness. Consumption is low and creation is high.

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Left: While the rest of the encampment morphs day to day and year to year, the Man figure remains exactly the same, a creative constant.

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My own fascination with Burning Man comes from the incredibly varied and authentic art produced each year, and the distinct way it fills the heart of this instant town. The art ranges from hundreds of homemade banners flown in camps, to wild nomadic architectural experiments, to personal creative statements erected along the road, to spontaneous theater, to gigantic

Above: Burning Man from the air.

Below: "Fire people" dispense kerosene street lanterns at dusk.



and intricate installations that must take a year to create. Several qualities make the art of Burning Man some of the best being made these days.

First, it is art situated in a natural place. Most of the pieces, including the folk art, are birthed out of the particular climate and geography of the alkaline flat. It's environmental art, place art. The makings play off the emptiness, or the drabness, or the flatness of this particular place. Or they play off the absence of urban lights at night. They use the infinity of the clay playa itself to create something. Concepts that would not work in a room can shine in this stark world of wind and dust.

Second, the art is ubiquitous but not insistent. Burning Man's city is so vast now that it is way beyond the capabilities of a single person to see. You could walk days and not see every creation, every bit of impromptu theater, every bizarre juxtaposition (I've tried); but you're not supposed to.

Some of the best pieces are built a long ways from the bustle; if you happen to walk out there and see it, great! There are no signs directing you there, no ads, no touting, no map, no tour, no desperate attempts to make sure you visit. The art is generous in that way. It doesn't demand that you



Above: 23,000 in attendance; no cars allowed. "Main Street" bustles with bikes and pedestrians.

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see it. More often than not, it was made for the pleasure of making it. If you happen upon it and enjoy it, all the better.

Third, all the art is anonymous. There are no tags and labels, even for the best, most time-intensive creations. The most ambitious pieces take months to prepare, and thousands of dollars to create. They may be made by well-known artists (and some are) or by complete unknowns (and most are), but no distinction is even attempted. Without the striving that names bring, the art is easier to enjoy. The anonymity also nudges others to try making something—an object, a place, or an event. As the official Burning Man mandate goes—"No Spectators." The audience become artists (at least for a week) and the artists become the audience.

Last, there is no money inside. Perhaps the most radical design of Burning Man has been its nearly total prohibition of commerce within the city. This is not done out of any heavy socialistic impulse: after all, tickets at the gate cost \$100.

Above: In empty blackness miles from the electric grid, messing with lights creates great effects. This saucer joins neon animals, lasers, and light-art of every kind.

Below: Participants gather daily at the Man's feet, moments before the first ray of sunlight hits the figure to a chorus of cheers.

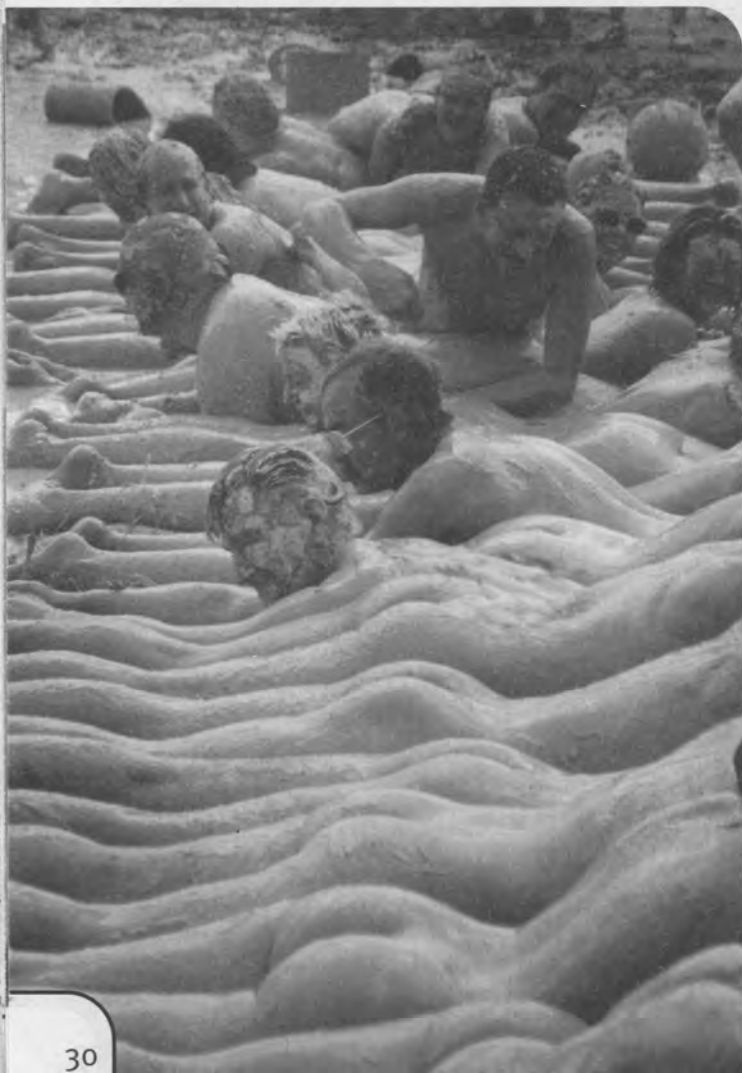
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Above: It's a girl thing. Women doff their tops, whoop it up, and circle the Man.

Below: Man-made mud pool. The game was to slither over the rumps of others and at the end of the line become a rump yourself.



Right: Sail flower thing. "I have no idea what this is supposed to be; it was in the middle of a pile of sound equipment at a rave station." —KK



Create-a-participant. Sculpture by Maggie Hallinan.

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Rather it was a brilliant move to institute a zone of creation where the focus was on passion, expression, and gifts. For instance, it is perfectly acceptable to give away lemonade and snow cones, or cook free pancakes for all comers, and this is what indeed happens. The art is given away, which encourages others to make stuff to give away. To an extent I would not have believed possible, the banning of vending of any type, of advertising, of buying and selling (at least in the city itself) transformed the art of the city. The necessary survival self-reliance this entails (you've got to bring everything you need to live, since you can't buy anything) also births an artistic self-reliance.

How big can Burning Man get and still retain this wonderful sensibility? Few would have believed it could have grown to the size of a typical American town and still work in this exuberant way, but its founder, artist Larry Harvey, believes Burning Man could encompass 100,000 inhabitants or more and still work as a city of art. And that's what he is planning to do. I'm beginning to believe that it is possible. If you'd like to join (no spectators!), start with [www.burningman.com](http://www.burningman.com). ❀

Kevin was editor of *Whole Earth Review*, and co-founder of the Hackers' Conference and the WELL (the first online community). He's now an editor at large for *WIRED*. He's written two provocative books: *Out of Control: The Rise of Neo-Biological Civilization* (Perseus, 1995) and *New Rules for the New Economy* (Viking, 1998). He's kind, and very supportive of our revival; he listens carefully, carries the best of Christian heartfulness, took his kids to Burning Man, and probes the optimistic techno mind/body/borg futures better than anyone I know. —PW