

BLOUINARTINFO

Slouching Towards Burning Man: Is the Counterculture Fest Evolving or Devolving?



"Pier 2" at Burning Man 2012

by Ben Davis

Published: November 29, 2012

About one half hour before it goes up, the 40-foot-tall wooden sculpture at the center of Burning Man raises its hands to salute the sky. Summoned by the gesture, a vast crowd of revelers comes swarming in across the desert, lit up with glowsticks or electroluminescent wire, caked in dust, clad in costumes, half naked. Thousands more ride in on the desert's flotilla of art cars, psychedelic dreadnoughts decorated as dragons, or starships, or things less recognizable. From these vehicles, waves of music wash across the scene, unifying into a throbbing field of ecstatic noise. Lasers crisscross the sky.

Then the fireworks begin, and the end is nigh. A concussive thunderclap splits the air. Immense fireballs engulf the Man. The crowd bellows in delight. The resulting inferno consumes the structure, which wavers for long minutes before collapsing, the furious turbulence of the heat churning the air

and whipping up tornados of dust that hover in the blaze's wake like hallucinations. At last, the structure melts in on itself in a wave of sparks. A little later, the crowd will gather in, and some of the more ecstatic Burners will strip and dance around the still-blazing pool of debris. It is one of the most otherworldly artistic spectacles that I have ever seen.

1.

I went to Burning Man this year at the end of August, and it has taken me a few months to sort out how I felt about it. This orgiastic cultural shindig has been written about so many times, from so many angles that one almost hates to add to the pile (there's even a [boom in Burning Man scholarship](#) in the academy). In one form or another, the festival has been around since the mid-'80s, and in the Black Rock Desert for more than two decades now. It is either a running cultural joke or a holy pilgrimage, depending on your point of view.

Both impressions have to do with the evangelical zeal of serious Burners. People really *believe* in Burning Man. When you roll up along the long, dusty desert trail to the official entrance, a team is on hand to meet you at the gates. Returning Burners are greeted with the words, "Welcome Home." First-timers (aka "Burgins") are made to get down on their knees and hug the ground, baptizing themselves in the alkaline desert dust.

There are 10 Core Principles of Burning Man, formulated and promulgated by the event's founding guru Larry Harvey: Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Radical Self-reliance, Radical Self-expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leaving No Trace, Participation, and Immediacy. But over the course of the week, as more and more revelers pack into the camps, as the fever pitch of swarming parties grows ever more intense, it often really feels as if there are just three: Sex, Drugs, and Dubstep. Burning Man is one part social experiment, one part garden-variety rave.

It is also big business. This organization which celebrates decommodified living is now a \$23-million concern. In the last decade, the event has grown by leaps and bounds, from about 30,000 attendees to 50,000-plus in 2012. And it may now be at a turning point: Last year, the event overflowed the limits of the population that it was allowed to have on public land, granted to it by the Bureau of Land Management. So this year, for the first time, tickets were [limited by a lottery](#), thereby guaranteeing that many longtime Burners — the kind of people who build the spectacular art installations and volunteer for various unglamorous tasks in the temporary community of Black Rock City — were excluded. This broke up longtime camps, and led to bottomless rancor from the excluded and the chosen alike.

Meanwhile, the ever-greater number of pilgrims has drawn the eye of area authorities. Cash-strapped Pershing County is [pushing a new festival ordinance](#) that guarantees it more money from Burning Man — a lot more, from \$170,000 last year to \$450,000 this year, to a possible \$800,000 next year

— supposedly to fund law enforcement. In late August [the Burning Man Organization \(BMORG\) announced](#) it was fighting the increase in the courts. The same ordinance also gives lawmen greater power to go after suspected illegal activity.

This year at least, the event still felt sparsely policed, but rangers prowling in their trucks were not an uncommon sight, a circling reminder of reality.

2.

Old timers will tell you that Burning Man hasn't been its wild self since the '90s, but to the newbie it remains a pretty astounding experience. For a week, a temporary city of many tens of thousands of revelers springs whole from the dust. Nothing is for sale within the confines of the city (except ice and some coffee that benefits a charity); gifting is the rule. Various camps come prepared to serve up staggering acts of generosity, giving away clothing and alcohol, Vietnamese iced coffee and New Orleans-style gumbo. During the day, people stroll or bike about the vast encampment in states of semi-undress, hippie chic mixed with the default raciness of the average East Village Halloween.

Campers rough it in tents and [hexayurts](#), but also raise vast theme camps. These become particularly impressive along the Esplanade, the final street before the empty desert stretch that takes you out towards the Man, which presides over the festivities as the main orienting landmark. Along this dusty boulevard, you could this year find a fully functioning roller disco, a nude bar, a five-story phallic tower known as "[BaalMart](#)" with geodesic domes for testicles, and a "[Thunderdome](#)" where combatants, strapped into trapezes, battled each other nightly in savage faux combat. The colossal dance camps out at the edges go until the sunrise, jets spitting fire into the sky whenever a particularly sick beat drops.

Since the beginning, Burning Man has been about art-making as well. Generous grants fund a program of sculpture that dots the desert plane between the crescent-shaped Black Rock City and the Man for the event's duration. Lit up an night, these become a phosphorescent garden of wonders. This year the projects included a pleasure grotto consisting of hammocks made of thousands of repurposed plastic zip ties — a funkier Tara Donovan — as well as a labyrinth, a carousel, and various fire-shooting installations and trance-inducing light works. Canadian artist Laura Kimpton created "[The Ego Project](#)," a towering sculpture of the word "EGO" made from 10,000 gleaming devotional figurines. That was burned. Oakland's Dan Fox erected the 50-foot-high "[Anubis](#)," a wooden effigy of the jackal god that guards the underworld in Egyptian mythology. It too was sacrificed to the fire.

This year's most impressive work was almost certainly "[Pier 2](#)," by a team out of Reno. It consisted of a full-scale recreation of a shipwrecked Spanish Galleon, "La Llorona," plunging into the desert, set at

the end of an actual pier jutting out from the Esplanade. The detail on “Pier 2” was staggering, from the rigging down to the cargo below in the hold. The masts spit fire, while a lighting setup projected blue waves into the sand at night, making it look like the sea. “Pier 2,” among other things, demonstrates how consuming this temporary spectacle has become: A team of some 70 people [labored for months](#) to realize this pop-up attraction.

Are there any generalizations you can make when it comes to the Burning Man aesthetic? The art is wonderful, at times wondrous. It combines a groovy '60s sensibility with a knack for high-tech gimcrackery, as befits its Bay Area origins. The typical work of Burning Man art is a big, tactile thing meant to be touched and climbed on, or marveled at. The aesthetic is distinguished by almost pure, dewy-eyed positivity; challenging or troubling themes are avoided.

The exception that proved the rule this year was artist Otto von Danger’s “[Burn Wall Street](#),” a cluster of five full-scale buildings meant to represent the nation’s nefarious financial institutions: “Bank of UnAmerica,” “Chaos Manhattan,” and so on. They were burned to their foundations on Saturday night to the approval of cheering throngs. Anarchist-leaning campers attacked the work with graffiti early in the week, accusing it of being politically disingenuous. And indeed, for a political artwork, the piece’s self-description in the official guide toiled comically hard to depoliticize its message, declaring, “We are not one-percenters or ninety-percenters [sic], we are all Americans that need to fix this” — a disavowal of class antagonism that rings fundamentally hollow coming from someone blowing a [reported](#) \$100,000 to pull off a bit of pyrotechnic theater in the desert.

3.

A semi-suppressed myth has it that the Burning Man was originally the Burning Woman. Supposedly, founder Larry Harvey was torching an effigy of his ex, to cleanse himself. He [denies this now](#), and you can understand why, since it adds a note of troubling sexual angst to the free-loving affair. I like this origin story though, since it emphasizes that the shape your efforts take is as much due to the ugly mental baggage that you are trying to leave behind as to the beautiful fantasy that you hope to create.

Sometime on Wednesday morning, I found myself sitting cross-legged in an airy pavilion, half shielded from the baking sun, attending a workshop on “[EFT Tapping](#).” Clad as an extravagant fairy godmother, a woman lectured 70 or so eager disciples on the virtues of “taking simple instructions” from “The Source” — not over-thinking things and listening to your intuitions, I take it. We repeated a mantra about loving ourselves as we each tapped rhythmically on our foreheads, chins, chests, and ribs, over and over, for 45 minutes or so.

Each year, the various camps of Black Rock City offer up a staggering grassroots program of events. There are workshops and entertainments at all hours of the day, covering topics from acro-yoga to “chaos magic” to pastimes more racy. At any hour of the day, you can get spanked, tied up, or

attend helpful seminars such as “Legal Aspects of Making Porn” or “Double Penetration: The Art and Science of the DP.” If you are a woman, you can make an appointment to engage in some heavy petting with some guy named Vince (“Vince is on a mission to find the hottest female kisser on the playa,” the event description in the official guide explained.) But what stands out, to me at least, is the number of the workshops that boil down to the simple imperative to *let go* and *be present*, a lesson delivered in a thousand forms and with varying degrees of cultish alternative spirituality thrown in for spice.

As we sat there in the heat, tapping away at our energy meridians, the fairy godmother asked her audience if over-thinking things could hold us back in our lives. “Yes!” the women in front of me called out, the exhalation sounding like orgasmic release. “Yes!” the man behind me echoed. He sounded more like he was about to cry.

Burning Man’s leitmotif of “Immediacy” may seem obvious enough in an environment so laser-focused on hedonism. But it also reminds you of the deep social purpose that this event serves: obsessive calculation, constant competition, and ruthless abstract thinking are not necessarily the keys to a happy personal life, but they are the characteristics of the successful personality in our particular society. No surprise, then, that many people come to view their own personality as an enemy, as something to be vanquished in order to feel fully human. Certainly, Burners can seem [self-indulgent to a comical degree](#). But the fact that a place exists where people can go to be gods and goddesses, nymphs and satyrs, astronauts and perverts — to escape their own heads for a brief, sun-kissed holiday — should be considered basically a good thing.

Leaving the “EFT Tapping” workshop, I came upon a phone booth on the other side of the street. A sign on it said “Talk to God.” I picked up the receiver and spoke: “What’s the secret to happiness?”

After a moment, a woman’s voice answered. “Look around,” she instructed, tranquilly. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

I looked around at the tents flapping slowly in the desert breeze, baking in the desert sun, crusted with desert dirt. The camp still had the slightly stunned feeling that follows a night of heavy partying. I agreed that it was beautiful.

“Today,” God said, “I want you to focus on *just being here*.”

4.

Burning Man can be a cathartic experience. For true believers, however, it is more than that; it is also something like a movement. That is how Larry Harvey [speaks about it today](#), and the organization has just recast itself as the Burning Man Project, a non-profit that will focus on spreading its gospel through supporting pocket utopias throughout the world. Its native politics seem to range left, from

entrepreneurial libertarianism to sturdy liberalism to anarchism to — leaving the left-wing galaxy for a minute — the guy who explained to me that we were all aliens “trapped behind enemy lines” in human bodies. You can't deny that Burning Man has inspired some worthy projects, [from various environmental initiatives to various forms of volunteerism](#). Still, when people start talking about Burning Man as a cause, I get suspicious.

Much sincere and worthy attention is paid to promoting sustainability. “Leave No Trace, Make Your Mark” is the mantra. But you cannot convince me that throwing a massive outdoor party with hundreds of machines that shoot fire into the sky is a model of sustainability. It is a model of decadence. More importantly, it ought to be a rule that any community that is as [un-diverse as the Burning Man community](#) be prohibited from styling itself as a reasonable facsimile of a workable alternative model for society. If you want exposure to diverse communities, try the subway or bus. Skip Burning Man. (Can you imagine if there was an event that attracted predominantly people of color to swap illegal substances and burn symbols of civilization? It wouldn't last a month.)

There is a politics of hedonism — or “Radical Self-expression,” or whatever you care to call it — but it is a contested politics. New Orleans's Mardi Gras, with much deeper roots in a broad and diverse urban culture, began as a masked bacchanalia whose specter of cross-class and cross-race fraternization alarmed Louisiana elites; post-Civil War, the city's elites reclaimed it making it over as something more genteel, as a vehicle to lure visitors back to the South and to reassert their cultural authority. In modern times, Mardi Gras has become a thoroughly mainstream spectacle of commercialized exhibitionism, though it continues to nurture various alternative currents and its Krewes form a vital organ of community life. So the question should be, how is Burning Man evolving? What ideological pressures are shaping it?

Every year, people come to Burning Man and re-find their sexuality, or experiment with something new. Yet you can't really, today, believe that promiscuity is some wild alternative value; it is a quite commodified value, and one that fully appeals to a crowd with no interest in Burning Man's more idealistic side at all. In the Black Rock Weekly, Burning Man's pop-up paper, the increasingly omnipresent “Frat Boy” is #1 archetype on its “Ladies Guide to the Creeps of Burning Man.” At various junctures, the event can feel downright seedy — or worse. One mother's [anguished post on ePlaya](#) has rightly received much attention this year, post-Burn:

Thursday night my daughter (who is 19) and I went riding our bikes to a few art installations. We were sober. She decided to go see Burn Wall Street but I was tired. She took off on her bike. On the way to the installation it began to rain. She ducked into Want It Camp. 12 hours later she arrived back to our camp hallucinating and having been given an IV at the med tent.

She had been found behind Emerald City, face down and overdosing. The rangers assumed she had gotten drunk or taken drugs. Several hours after returning to our camp bruises appeared on her neck and it was obvious from other signs that she had been sexually attacked.

She IDENTIFIED her attacker — a DJ from Want It — and he had an accomplice. There are NO rape kits on the playa nor forensic nurses. Because my daughter did not want to be taken to Reno, questioned for a 9th time (she had already given descriptions and a report to the Pershing County officials on the playa) she was told no charges could be filed.

This episode is as terrifying as it is revealing. Sexual assault must be a concern at a sprawling festival dedicated to transgression — yet the organizers seem unprepared to confront this dark aspect of the event head on. [Grilled by the San Francisco Weekly](#), they even deflected the issue rather than promising to be sure the festival was prepared to deal with rape in the future. Such incidents will certainly not help Burning Man's case that Pershing County needn't step up law enforcement.

This undercurrent is not much discussed. On the contrary, the main recurrent complaint of Burners is that the event has become too genteel, too touristy. There are more observers, fewer participants. This year, an extravagantly bitter opinion piece in the [Black Rock Weekly](#) by someone named “Shutterslut” blasted camps who use Kickstarter to fund their projects, offering easy access to wealthy donors as a reward. He seemed clear that a line was being crossed in the evolution of the festival:

Up until last year, this was just one of the trends happening and it wasn't clear which would become the way the Burn grew, but with the sell-out in 2011 and now dealing with a ticket demand that's greater than the supply, it seems the way camps will deal with reconfiguring for the new world isn't to create flexible camp plans that can be altered based on tickets, or to aim high but risk failure; but to still aim for grandiose dreams, now paid for with the cash of others. Apparently the thinking is that if we don't have bodies, we'll take money. That's just the wrong way to plan.

It's time to go back to just building amazing, dangerous camps with what you can afford. I would rather see someone come up with great ideas and create a marvelous janky pile on their own than build a golden city with other people's money.

More contentious still is the rising prominence of “plug-and-play” camps, which specialize in catering to the wealthier set of revelers who want to “watch the wildlife” without sacrificing customary conveniences, staying in air-conditioned RVs instead of suffering in the dust. “Fat Cats in Cash-for-Camps Controversy,” blared a mock-tabloid headline in the [Black Rock Beacon](#), yet another Burning Man paper.

“Like any city, we have people with a variety of income levels, and we welcome them all,” a BMORG spokesman told the paper, when asked about official policy towards “plug-and-plays” (the BMORG also claims a cut of all the profits made by such operators). So it is that inequality comes to Black Rock City. It may be worth remembering that [social scientists tell us](#) that inequality is closely tied to a community’s reported level of happiness.

5.

“You know that thing? That thing you love about Burning Man? It could go away — and no one even asked for your opinion.” So read stickers put up in the port-a-johns this year, apparently by [12TrashFrence.org](#), a modestly dissident group that has sprung up to provide unsolicited “guidance” to the BMORG from those who care about the future of the event.

This was a down year for Burning Man, likely because of the ticketing disaster. After mostly steady and relentless growth, fewer people made the trek this year, down to 52,384 from almost 54,000 last year. Still, Burning Man is not about to fade away. It plays too necessary a role in people’s psychic economy. In San Francisco, it is something like a holiday.

One night in camp, as a joint was being passed around, people began to discuss what it all meant. “Why can’t it always be like this?” someone said. “I mean, look around — this is the way it should be. This is people helping people. This is what we are capable of. If the government could only pay attention, look out at all this creativity, all this building, there wouldn’t be any recession. You could put everybody to work.” He drew in on the joint.

And you just want to yell: *Yes and no!* (Admittedly not a great thing to yell.) *Yes:* It’s an amazing experience. *Yes:* The creativity on view is mind-expanding, the climate of generosity inspiring, the de-commodified vibe enlivening. And *yes:* At its best moments, which are many, Burning Man feels charged with wholesome utopian energy. In its pagaentry, you see men and women grasping for the kind of meaningful experience that they — tapping away their waking lives in soul-killing cubicles, with only the rewards of a shrill and disposable commercial culture to comfort them — have been deprived.

But also, no. *No:* It can’t “always be like this,” because the whole thing is an extremely privileged experience that costs thousands of dollars and a week of your life. *No:* It does not show you “what we are capable of.” It offers a rather partial picture of human potential, desperately insistent on positivity and transcendence on account of its own condensed and fleeting nature. Without confronting the more sinister aspects of our experience, those aspects can only grow, unchecked. And *no:* If the powers-that-be could “just see,” that would change nothing — the world is messed up because it is profitable for very powerful people that it stay that way, not because powerful people are confused.

The society we live in tends not to let little islands of happiness exist. It corrupts them. Hiding them in the desert stalls this process but does not stop it. Burning Man's 10 Principles are a great basis for a festival, but they aren't tough enough to stand as a basis for changing the world. They can't even stop the world from changing it.

Burning Man will likely continue to grow. It will likely even get more spectacular, as more money and interest flows in. But it is, indeed, *that thing* — the thing that makes Burning Man something that people believe in as a cause, not just a kind of turbo-charged spring break — that's in play. *That thing* may prove to have been precious exactly because it could only last a while, like the Man itself. Or like one of the dust devils that rises periodically from the Black Rock Desert, kicking up a towering funnel of sand, only to dissolve into the atmosphere on contact with anything solid.