

Bonfire of the Techies

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Hordes of Playful Digerati Assemble for a Hallowed Annual Rite

On the last weekend in August, my two young daughters and I will pack our suburban minivan with 2 1/2 gal. of water per person per day and head off to northern Nevada. There, in thousands of square miles of pure desert nothingness, 20,000 cheering, dancing celebrants will circle a towering, two-legged wooden sculpture and burn it to the ground.

It happens every Labor Day. Burning Man, as the festival is known, is an annual outbreak of techno-tribalism that has the makings of the next great American holiday. If this year's party is like past ones, the immense desert flats will be teeming with offbeat stunts, weird art, flamboyant performances and bizarre, gasoline-powered contraptions. When we pulled up to Burning Man for the first time several years ago, we were greeted by a fat guy riding a large, furry rabbit motor scooter. He sat behind the ears. Across the desert we could see a truck hauling a mattress behind it, stirring up a huge, blinding vortex of dust. Three passengers in gas masks were reclining on the mattress, waving insanely.

It gets even stranger. Each year a do-it-yourself city appears overnight. On one makeshift street, a three-story tower of scaffolding grows like a high-tech mushroom; draped with a parachute, it becomes an instant cafe. At a table, generous folks with a spare gallon of blue body paint offer to turn you into an alien. Behind them, two guys have built a house out of old wooden doors hauled in on a yellow rental truck. Inside you hear hypnotic techno music. The house will be gone 48 hours later, as will the rest of the instant city.

This premillennial Woodstock got started 12 years ago when an unknown artist, Larry Harvey, built a wooden statue on a foggy beach near San Francisco and then set it on fire. For Harvey it was a catharsis to heal a broken relationship. For his friends it was a soul-energizing blast, and Harvey decided it should be an annual ritual. He cast a single brilliant rule: no spectators. What he wanted, he said, was to create "a Disneyland in reverse." Everyone had to be a participant and march in the electric-light parade.

In succeeding years, Harvey's wooden statue became a 40-ft.-high man; the flames leaped higher, and the crowd grew ever more animated and theatrical. The intensity eventually taxed even the beatnik- and hippie-hardened San Francisco police, who asked Harvey and his acolytes to move off the beach. The Zen of the desert beckoned.

Once on the public lands of northern Nevada, where the rules are few and the possibilities infinite, Burning Man blossomed into a full-fledged happening. By word of mouth, via friend of a friend, with photocopied flyers posted in music stores, Burning Man quietly gathered a tribe of hundreds each summer to partake in the meaningless but mesmerizing ritual. And there, in its seclusion, it might still be, if it weren't for cyberspace.

News spreads quickly and efficiently via E-mail, and when the digerati got wind of Burning Man, something clicked. The pierced and tattooed young Netizens of Silicon Valley and the Bay Area spend their workdays and worknights making little decentralized theaters of do-it-yourself creativity on the World Wide Web. Burning Man and its temporary city are material manifestations of the same creative urge. It was a perfect fit, a perfect way to celebrate a year of laboring on the Internet.

And so the Netizens flocked to the desert, where Burning Man's neo-tribal vibes were amplified with the technology of the digital revolution. They set up Burning Man Web pages and E-mail lists. They started two Burning Man radio stations, broadcasting live from ground zero in the desert. From a laptop they produced a daily Burning Man paper.

If you build it, they will come--and they have. The population of Burning Man doubles every year. Last year it was just shy of 10,000. Its cheery inventiveness pulls in mid-40-year-olds like me, who load up the family minivan and find a spot--any spot!--in the vastness to camp and cavort.

I would make the trek just to see the guy whose obsession is a jet engine the size of a truck muffler bolted to go-cart wheels; he sits in front of the glowing, screaming toy and zips across the alkali flats. It's nothing like piloting a computer. And there's the elaborate camera obscura some thoughtful person usually sets up, big enough to walk into and see the desert upside down. And this year, if my girls can be talked into it, we'll squish in the mud of nearby hot

springs and wander around as dried-mud people, just like everyone else.

Burning Man almost did not rise from its last pile of ashes. Two of the key organizers quit last year after one young man died in the chaos and dust storm churned up by thousands of vehicles driving every which way on the roadless flats of Black Rock Desert. The karma of mayoring such a bohemian city was more than they bargained for. But Larry Harvey, a visionary in the classic sense of the word, is undaunted. "They told us it would fall apart at 1,000 people," he says. "Then at 5,000. But we could have a million people and still make it a positive, uplifting experience."

He may yet get his wish. The location is kept vague, and tickets (to pay for portable toilets and the like) are best found via the Web. By not advertising the event and making finding it a rite of initiation, Harvey gets his crowds and his harmony. By now, it's self-feeding, bigger than Harvey or anyone else. Its main draw seems to be its utter lack of meaning.

Anything lacking meaning will be assigned one. My bet is that Burning Man will be the holiday for deskbound, no-collar workers. Not only does it offer the usual American pastimes--fast cars, parades, costume balls, picnics and all-night music--but it also provides the more contemporary attractions of survival camping, neon lights, nudity, performance art and staged extravaganzas. It's got the sun-dried culture of postmodern road warriors: deep ritual without religion, community without commitment, art without history, technology without boundaries. As essayist Bruce Sterling writes in the only book about the event, *Burning Man* (HardWired; 1997), which I and others at *Wired* magazine had a hand in producing, "It's just big happy crowds of harmless arty people expressing themselves and breaking a few pointless shibboleths that only serve to ulcerate young people anyway. There ought to be Burning Man festivals held downtown once a year in every major city in America."

Why? It's hard to say, precisely. Even after a day spent visiting the various tribes at the event--the pyromaniac camp, the rave camp, the wind-surfers camp, the rainbow camp--and then standing before the terrible heat of the very big fire of the neon-lit man, the answer is not any easier to articulate. Harvey, in the sly coyote logic of a true desert mystic, puts it this way: "If we didn't burn it, we wouldn't be able to burn it again next year."

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