

*The true appeal of Burning Man lies not only in the extravaganza of the event. Americans are drawn to this event because it is a living antidote to many of the illnesses their society suffers from. In the minds of the organizers Burning Man is a societal, political act. Larry Harvey, the founder and Executive Director of Burning Man describes the thoughts behind the event in his speeches and interviews. The following text consists of excerpts of his speeches, mainly "La Vie Bohême" and "Viva Las Xmas", and an interview the writer held during Burning Man 2003.*

I was born in 1948, at the beginning of the baby boom. One of my earliest memories is a trip my family took to visit my uncle in LA. I remember standing on my uncle's deck and gazing out across the rooftops, and mounted on each roof was an antenna. It stretched as far as I could see all the way to the horizon, and each of these antennas represented a TV. The great national seance had begun.

I play a game with my son. I turn off the sound of commercials on TV, and then we guess what is being sold. The results are oftentimes astonishing. Images of security and happiness, pride and potency, community and love glide smoothly across the screen. Very typically it's only at the end that you discover that these imagined mental states are attached to a brand of cheese, automobile or an oil company. The commodification of our culture, a final phase of late 20th century capitalism, has only gradually become apparent. Beneath each roof in every house, there exist people held in isolation from the world at large. Like those famous prisoners in Plato's cave, these internees are given only spectral shadows to experience. They stare steadily at entertaining images and by degrees mistake them for palpable things and real experience. They endure this vicarious state from day to day, from year to year, now throughout entire lifetimes, in a state of isolation from the sunlit world and from one another.

Modern demographics have also affected the subtlety of this image making. A lifestyle, with its panoply of status coded goods, is a commodified version of what we used to call a way of life. Marketers have learned to sort us into separate stalls like cattle in a feed lot. Using focus groups, it's endlessly possible to invent new and appealing lifestyles which give us the illusion we are making lifestyle statements and are members of imaginary peer groups. That these fashions require no participation in the life of a community is not the concern of the merchant.

We have become a nation of posers. It's not a life that's lived or shared, but an imitation of life, a kind of commercial for self. It's as if we ourselves are now TVs and broadcast images. America is now wealthier than at any other time in its history, yet all around us and within us a feeling of lurking anomie persists. The spread of materialistic values has contributed to a moral coarsening and a growing cynicism in our country. Within a manipulative world all motives seem venal, all efforts illusory. But at a deeper level, it is the commodification of imagination itself, the moral passivity, the social isolation, the angst that is generated by living in a solipsistic world of fraudulent satisfactions that is producing the greatest evil. Critics call for better values. Yet to even entertain a moral value one must first be someone in a world beyond one's self. The vital here and there of spiritual experience is disappearing from our world. The world, in some nauseating fashion, no longer appears to belong to itself.

We need some deep and drastic therapy to break this spell. We need to reestablish contact with our inner selves. We need to reinvent a public world. We need immediate

connection to the natural world of vital need. And this is where my work and the experiment called Burning Man comes in.

Let me tell you about the deep background of Burning Man. It started with the punks. The punks were laden with "tude", they specialized in a kind of puckish truculence. In the late 70s and early 80s it began to turn into a movement that espoused two very basic ideas. The first one was, "we will never sell out, no, we won't sell out!". It's not surprising that this would be so paramount. You're talking about a generation that had seen everything it ever loved taken away from it. Throughout their lives they'd endured the same recurring experience. Something would be invented in the context of community, and culture would be generated spontaneously out of the interactions of individuals who felt that they belonged to a thing, and that it belonged to them, and out of that ethos they would begin creating things that embodied their identity in the world. And as soon as that happened, someone would come along, a market scout, and it would be appropriated, and it would be marketed as a lifestyle, and it would be turned into an image, and it would be completely denatured of any meaning that it ever had for anyone.

So the punks made it their first tenet that "we won't sell out!". The other idea was "make your own show". For awhile during the punk era there existed this whole underground network that spanned the country, and you could book a venue in a garage or virtually anywhere, and it didn't involve the system. It was completely outside the system. These were outsiders, and the idea is that they were fiercely protecting their autonomy.

During that same era other variant strains developed. The Cacophony Society started in San Francisco and has since spread to several cities. We would do collaborative events. One of my favorites was a party called "The Atomic Cafe". It was held in an abandoned toothpaste factory, and this was quite illegal. People met in a parking lot and a truck came by and hauled us to the party. It was an interactive scenario premised on the notion that a nuclear war had occurred. The idea with Cacophony was always that you were the entertainment. You make your own show. So everybody dressed as if the great Armageddon was at hand and we had been suddenly plucked from our stations in life and were there in this ruin of a warehouse and we had come to attend the nightclub at the end of the world. Everyone brought cans of food which had to have a minimum shelf life of 20 years.

All of this activity forms the immediate background of Burning Man. It forms a whole series of these anti-consumerist utopias that people were trying to create. The theoretician that people were always citing was Hakim Bey, who originated the notion of TAZ, the "Temporary Autonomous Zone". This was anarchist theory. The notion was that the only way you could subvert the system was to seize ground like guerrilla soldiers in a jungle. You could commandeer some part of the public environment and make your own show, create your own rules, and then, before the authorities showed up, you'd melt away back into the jungle.

When we went out to the desert in 1990, we brought with us the ethos that we had learned in an underground culture, and one of the first ideas is that you don't sell out, and if you want to get a little more positive, you can turn that around and convert it into a gift-giving ethic.

I would like to describe the most radical and most under-reported aspect of our city. Black Rock City is one of the most public-spirited places on Earth. We have, for instance, an incredible rate of volunteerism. We did a poll on the Internet recently: 84.7% of our citizens contributed some form of volunteer service to our city. I challenge anyone to find another city in America that can equal that. We're the seventh largest city in Nevada for eight days, and our crime rate is negligible. Think what the police blotter in New Orleans during Mardi Gras must look like. And Black Rock City is a party that's certainly equal to that in intensity.

Burning Man is this wild and abandoned party on the one hand, and it's the most public-spirited city in America on the other. The essential cause of all this is the giving of gifts. We've intentionally designed Black Rock City to foster what we call a gift economy. We allow no vending, no advertising, no buying or selling of anything. We discourage bartering. Instead, we've originated both an ethos and an economic system that is devoted to the giving of gifts. A gift economy is founded on principles that are diametrically different from those that dominate our consumer culture.

The great utility of the market system is that it supremely serves individual desire. All that's required of me is a sum of money that contributes to this process. The market has liberated us from toil, but more importantly, it has freed us to independently pursue uniquely personal visions of happiness. This is the version of our modern market that is constantly extolled in our society. But I would like to point out that this economic revolution has a darker side. If I should buy something from you, no relationship and no moral connection is left to relate us to one another. What this transaction does not necessarily produce is connections between people. It does not produce what Robert Putman and other writers have described as "social capital."

Social capital represents the sum of human connection that holds a society together, and it is fostered by networks of personal relationship. It is social capital that a culture is made of. And gifts are very good conductors of it. In the words of Lewis Hyde, "When gifts circulate within a group their commerce leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake, and a kind of decentralized cohesiveness emerges." Everybody begins to feel like they belong to one another.

Black Rock City is devoted to the giving of all sorts of things: the sharing of survival resources, interactive artwork, all of our public service roles. The whole tissue of our city is one vast gift. The city is created out of gifts, and we've actually created much our civic infrastructure out of gifts. We have people who volunteer to greet every person who comes into our city. The policing of the environment, the work of the Black Rock Rangers, is done by volunteers.

Theme camps best illustrates the gift giving process. In Black Rock City, this begins with a concept that we call radical self-expression. We ask participants to commune with themselves and to regard their own reality, that essential inner portion of experience that makes them feel real, as if it were a vision or a gift, and then project this vision out onto the world. And along with radical self-expression, comes radical self-reliance. Most of our citizens pool survival resources -- and they have to. This means they must prepare to survive in really drastic wilderness conditions; 100-degree temperatures, hundred mile-an-hour winds. And what tends to happen naturally is that people respond communally. That is, they form organized groups and someone says you bring the shelter, you bring the food, you bring the boa feathers, and we'll survive together. And

we didn't tell them to do this. They realized that they had to get communal: that is, they had to form bonding social capital in order to survive. That's how cultures developed originally. They developed an ethos and a sense of belonging over long spans of time because people had to share resources and struggle to survive together in the world -not quite like the economy of convenience that we live in today.

What has organically evolved out of that is what we call a theme camp. Many of these theme camps have become increasingly ambitious, incorporating two or three hundred people in some cases. People began to create extensions of their living quarters that embodied some creative idea, some kind of art project that they were willing to share with everyone else. We have never dictated the content of radical self-expression. But we have done another thing. We don't create the culture, they do, but we do create the societal vessel that helps to contain this creative process. So we've created a social context, created a few simple rules. We've said a theme camp must function as a public environment that is accessible to other people whom one doesn't know, and that it must result in some kind of social interaction. Observe what we've done. We've told people: okay, you've got your tight little world of your mates and your friends, and you're bonded together -- that's like a lot of sub-cultures in our world -but we've said don't close the circle. You cannot close the circle. And the shape of our city is like that too. It's planned as a huge semicircle and the Man is at the geographic center and the streets come out like an arc, and one time they said "Larry why don't you just close that circle," and I said, "Good God, we'd go psychotic. Don't close the circle!"

Theme camps are essentially collective gifts, collaborative acts of self-expression that are given to a civic world, and this, in turn, begins to generate gift-giving networks. We've made our city as large and as civic as it is in order to create a sufficiently persuasive model of the world to show people how things could be. I still want it to grow larger. I want it to feel like a complete model of civilization so that people can go back home with the confidence that they can change the world -- that they don't have to be defined by the context that surrounds them -- that they can define the world by the vision that's inside them, they can share that vision with other people and they can attach to it some transcendent principle. That is why the Man stands at the center of our city.

This process begins with radical self-expression: the feeling that your inmost vital self is real and that you can project a vision of this sense of your own being onto the surrounding world. So it starts with what call "I Am." And it proceeds, as in a theme camp, to a feeling that you are united with others, that you are linked in a bonded circle and that together you can share the same experience through an act of giving. I call this, "We Are." Finally there is the feeling that somewhere outside this circle there exists some greater gift that everyone is joined together by as they give to it. I call this, "It Is." And I have come to believe that whenever these feeling states can be strung together like pearls on a string, as if they were parts of one spontaneous gesture, you will then generate an ethos, a culture, that leads, in Jeffries words, to a "boundless shower of good things forever descending".

Let me tell you how our civic entity has dealt with solid waste disposal. Black Rock City is built upon the pristine surface of a prehistoric lakebed. And we're committed to a Leave No Trace effort. We say Burning Man is a disappearing act. We miracle up an entire city, it lasts for one week, and then it absolutely disappears: every sequin, every boa feather, every cigarette butt, and especially those damn pistachio nutshells. This

wouldn't be possible, of course, if we didn't put great effort into it. But our organization couldn't possibly cope with this task if it wasn't for the civic spirit of our citizens. There are no trashcans in our city. Think about that: a city with no trashcans. We have actually told people that they should take all of their garbage and put it in plastic bags, cram it in their car and take it out of there. Pick up your own garbage. And they do it!

People learn civic virtue here. This has been a nursery school for that. And a lot of the younger people really need that because they just see society as a vending machine. They don't see that there's a social contract. We've created a model, an experiment, indeed an initiation that has led to the formation of positive, constructive values. And a renewed believe in the possibility of transcendence. Transcending your isolation as an individual, transcending the small confines of the 100 people you can keep up a relationship with. Identifying with society itself. And people will begin to realise that they can apply the ethos, the values that they've learned here on how an entire society might function.

It was about 1994 or 95 that what we now call "dot com" people began to show up. I didn't get it until I began to navigate cyberspace myself and began to talk to these people. And what I discovered is that in their imaginations our desert seemed a lot like cyberspace, and this is a really a compelling analogy. We were in this severely abstracted space in which anyone could generate a kind of virtual reality. With a few props and a little imagination, you could create whole worlds, because it was a decontextualized environment. Well, that seemed a lot like the revolution brought about by the internet. You could create a concrete version of a website in the desert. The internet is a radically egalitarian medium. Burning Man is a radically egalitarian society. Both the internet and Burning Man are level playing fields. We have dot com millionaires. We have starving artists. We have dot com millionaires meeting starving artists -- and this really interests me!

When the Internet came along people said it will change everything and then the future didn't seem to happen. Part of that was because people mistook the nature of the media. They thought it was like TV. We've always known that that the real power of it was, and one of the highest and best uses, to organise social networks. There is somebody on the other side. Information flows through the internet, spreads out horizontally through networks of communication. Information no longer travels in only one direction. And I see the political implications of that. There are a series of events that have fascinated me. Falung Gong, Zapatistas, the WTO protesters have used the internet to organise. China executes of middle and top level bureaucrats because they know people are talking on the internet. Of course flash mobs do it. But all this is mostly negative.

We have learned over the years at BM to use the Internet in a constructive way. Our extranet is like a great open studio where each group has a space to organise in and then look in on other people's efforts. And it's a very potent tool for people to organize. We have learned that the internet is most potent and most useful when it coincides to real living, breathing communities where people struggle together, share resources. When you can really unify sentiment the result is tremendously potent. Look at the inherent power of the internet as the tool to completely turn around this consumer apparatus that completely dominated the last half of the twentieth century. More than

half of our people are now connected to us through the internet. The internet will change the world like the printing press did.

The most important event that will occur on the playa this year (2003) -and probably the least conspicuous- will be a summit meeting with all our regional representatives, about 80 of them. We founded a non-profit organisation which binds them to us and protects the interests of the community. The regional people have spontaneously began to contact us and say we want to get in touch with other participants. In essence they were saying we don't want to stop being as we were on BM. We began to link them up. And as time went on we began to offer them advice in particular instances because they were facing problems we were facing years before and develop tools or philosophies. We put them on a list so they could talk to one another. So now we founded a non profit whose mission it is to promote *socially robust interactive art*. That is art that requires community for its production and actually produces ad hoc a community in its exhibition. What we've always done is emphasize the importance of art, in part because marching under the legitimizing banner of art makes you get away with quite a lot. You can be the court jester, you can say things that would not be permitted otherwise.

Spontaneously their first reaction was to go back and organise retreats. But what we're going to encourage through the non-profit organization, is that they're not be content by simply forming refuges from the world. What we'll particularly do is create art events that uses the public space in their home town. Many have told us very sincerely that BM has changed their lives, then our question to them is, well why can't it change the life of their neighbours? It's always been one of our rules: radical inclusivity. We'll show them how we can all unite and form a united network with formed governance and institutions. We're going to divide the group up into geographic regions and ask larger organisations to mend towards the smaller groups. They begin to form a real community on earth. But I don't expect people to go out and form cities of their own—they will define the activity and it will spread by a rate of natural increase. I believe that human culture is a pure phenomenon of nature. The innate vitality of culture belongs to the world of nature; it occurs spontaneously, it is without a plan, and when it is allowed to grow it has a power to affect our world in ways that dwarf our normal estimate of our resources.

I believe this is ultimately the foot in the door. It will be the first part of the third phase of Burning Man, after communal life on the beach, and the civic community in the desert. And that at the end of that phase it begins to become political and people begin to do things.

I'd love to get to the political phase of Burning Man because that's when you start rearranging the furniture. But I think that you have to go through certain stages of experience for it not to be just another version of the same thing. I've learned to be patient, humble. Because if you start with the premise that culture is a naturally occurring, self organising process then you can't force it. You can help it. You can accelerate its development. As anything in nature it's a chaotic system but very subtly and more intricately ordered than anything we can create.

I think that to recreate workable politics in our present world, we first have to toil in our vineyard. It may not seem apparent now, but what we've patiently been doing is preparing the ground. And that ground is to recreate the basis by which culture itself can be generated. And what needs to happen, is that we have to start with the individual and

then work to a sense of the communal and then work to a sense of the civic and then work to a sense of the universal.

As the dialogues continues people will be more and more intelligently informed and develop a coherent philosophy. That's part of my job: to give them some ideas on what their experience should coalesce around. I can number of the phrases that we've used. But they really mean something because they're continually grounded through this ritual founded in dirt, in immediate experience. And as that intellectual sophistication grows, that will be a means to form a consensus within the community, so that masses, thousands on thousands of people, begin say yes, that's something that should be done. And at a certain moment what will happen is people will self-initiate political action. Everything we've learned at BRC is scalable to a much larger domain.

If it hasn't yet borne through as organised political effort. That's because we have to till the field, remove the rocks, and nurture the vines, until the cultural factor self interpenetrates the lives of those that have gone through this experience. And hundreds like them across the country.

But all over this country, people are starting to organize. They're starting to form networks, and we're organizing to help them. We are organizing to help people create the social circumstances that will sustain an ethos of gift giving. And I can tell you what's going to happen next because I have watched Burning Man grow from 2,000 to 4, 000 to 8,000 participants in a span of three years. Little nucleus's all over this country are about to rapidly expand in scope. We are no longer staging an event, we're coordinating a global community. People who are beginning to generate their own events in the UK, in America, and in Europe. Burning Man is now a movement, a phenomenon that extends itself organically, and it is growing on an exponential scale.