

# Burning Man

## A Festival in the Desert

PanDoor

2004

I have just left Black Rock City, the site of Burning Man, a yearly arts festival and temporary autonomous zone based on radical self-expression, and find myself in the paradoxical situation of being inspired to give written form to things that are utterly inexpressible.

In the desert of Nevada, Black Rock City is constructed entirely of art. It exists in material form for only one week in August every year, and then it disappears, as though into the ethers, its citizens dispersed to various faraway places.

Black Rock City is the most beautiful thing I have ever witnessed that was created by human hands. Much of the art is mobile. Giant vehicles turned into pirate ships, space shuttles, sharks, giant caterpillars, anything you could imagine, roam the playa in droves, all flammable and ready for the torch.

I could catalogue a list of incredible works of mad, creative genius. But even if I could successfully describe these things to you, I could never convey the greater sum of it all, the total immersion into another reality, one in which everything you see, do, or encounter is a work of beauty, created out of love, and given freely and abundantly to all.

## Everything is Given Freely

Giving is a crucial aspect of life there. Hakim Bey said that in an enlightened society, the basic transaction of the economy would be the gift, rather than the sale. Black Rock City is based on this principle. Once you have paid to get in (and though it's a lot of money, it is the best \$250 I've ever spent), there is no exchange of money allowed. The only exception to this is the sale of ice and chai at the main camp, whose proceeds all go to local charities. Actually, one day, a large crowd staged a mock demonstration demanding free chai that led to the temporary takeover of the tea booth.

But aside from these two exceptions, no money is exchanged. Everything is given freely. There are massage booths, popcorn stands (more like a popcorn temple, actually), insane rides, snow cones, sexual healing work, open bars, hookah lounges, foot-washing stations, provided free to all.

People give art they've created just for the occasion. The fact that, for once in our lives, money is not only unimportant, it is utterly useless, is an incredibly liberating feeling.

With its sense of total freedom, the festival is the ultimate Temporary Autonomous Zone, as Hakim Bey describes, and is the most beautiful and functional display of anarchy I've ever seen. There are guidelines and parameters of conduct within the city, mostly related to safety or to the preservation of the playa. However, within those parameters anything can happen and does happen. "Do What Thou Will..." is a fundamental of life during the event, though it is always tempered with a deeply felt sense of individual responsibility and a general atmosphere of love and benevolent enthusiasm.

These are my people

The most important thing I took away from my experience at Burning Man is the sense of community. When they burn the Man—the huge, stories high effigy—after a long period during which several hundred fire performers do a tightly choreographed fire dance, every one rushes the fire and circles around it. And, you look around you, and think, “My God!, there are so many of us.” It’s like the scene in the film, “The Matrix,” where they show Zion, and there are thousands and thousands of people, only these are my people, these are our people, these are the beautiful, awake, inspired, creative people who live at the fringes of civilization. And, you realize that we are a nation of such people. And of course, for every one who goes to Burning Man, there are thousands who would like to but can’t, and you realize what a force we are.

The whole week, I kept thinking that this was what the future of our species can be. Creating a city made of art—bringing fire and ritual and technology and music and sexuality and creative play together and creating a new paradigm—transcends the ethical questions of our current dependency on the old order.

Before I went, a friend described it as Mecca for freaks. I understand that now. My first Burning Man happened concurrently with (and perhaps was the spiritual antidote to) the Republican Convention where the current “president” accepts his role as the king who would sacrifice the life of his nation to serve himself.

To those who have never been, I urge you to make the pilgrimage to Black Rock City. It will renew your faith in the future, in the creative spirit, in the truth that anything is possible.

# fifth Estate

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