

National Post

Extreme art: Creative minds spend a week building a temporary city in the Nevada desert. Then they burn it all down

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Illustrations: Color Photo: Zac Bolan / The man burns on the last night of the festival

Color Photo: Htu Htu / Looking down Mars street

Color Photo: Htu Htu / One of the many creatively designed vehicles that cruise the streets of Black Rock City.

Color Photo: Htu Htu / Don't wait for the last minute to lineup for the bathroom: it takes about 20 minutes.

Color Photo: Htu Htu / More desert surrealism: When the only power comes from batteries and generators, glow-in-the-dark body paint comes in handy.

Color Photo: Agence France-Presse / An artist and his art -- himself.

Color Photo: Htu Htu / A sculpture made of CDs conceals a jukebox.

Color Photo: Laura Rauch, The Associated Press / In a lightning-proof suit, Dr. Megavolt gets hit with millions of volts of electricity in one of the most dangerous acts of the festival.

Color Photo: Htu Htu / Most are floating bars where people trade anything from art to underwear for drinks. Maybe that's what happened to the underwear of this woman, who is at the body-paint theme camp.

Color Photo: Hector Mata, Agence France-Presse / Two highly decorated men on stilts dance in front of a floating bar.

Color Photo: Htu Htu / A daytime procession to the Burning Man, who stands almost 20 metres high. Above, an aerial view of Black Rock City, laid out to resemble the wheel of time. The streets are named after celestial bodies and the hours on a clock.

Color Photo: Hector Mata, Agence France-Presse / A woman in red feathers wigs out in front of the Bone Tree.

Color Photo: Htu Htu / Not your average desert scene: When the temperature rises up to 30C, what could be more comfortable than a tutu?

Color Photo: The Burning Man, barely visible in this photo, stands at the centre.

Black & White Photo: Htu Htu /

From a distance, the Burning Man festival looks like a mirage, a city of glistening metal rising out of the desert heat. One hundred and sixty kilometres east of Reno, Nev., past the parched and blistered hills, it is the only sign of life in the Black Rock desert. Pulling off the highway and onto the desert floor, I follow, in a trail of dust, the white silty wake of all the cars in front of me. Underneath us is a dried lake bed --

the largest flat surface in North America.

Driving slowly, past signs saying "Welcome to the Future" and "Leave No Trace," I am waved through what looks like a border crossing and, as I arrive at the next checkpoint, I am greeted by a young man in a Costco vest. Behind him are other "greeters." There's an old man dressed up as a wizard and a woman painted entirely

in silver.

Burning Man is an annual week-long festival like no other. It's a gathering of creative minds who join together to build a temporary city as an experiment in civilization and community. Along with building a city, they construct art that reflects their wildest dreams. Participants work furiously to out-express each other. Then, at the end, they burn it all down and go home.

The "Costco" guy, 20-year-old Patrick Nemeth, of Vancouver, tells me that 16,000 people have arrived so far, but they are expecting 25,000. He hands me a survival guide and a map and quickly explains the street system of this temporary city. Shaped in a huge-U, the streets are named by planet and time. Patrick tells me the "Costco camp" is at Moon Circle and 6:30, and most of the Canadians are camped at 4:15 and Earth.

Like any city, he says, there are districts -- loud camp, quiet camp, kid's camp, the blue-light district. He points to the middle of the U and tells me that's called centre camp, where there is a cafe selling coffee, tea and ice (the only items for sale during the entire event; all participants have to bring their own water, food and anything else they wish to consume), the Ministry of Statistics, Radio Free Burning Man, the Black Rock Gazette, the Lamplighters, the Rangers and the Bartering Hut of Pancakes.

In a straight line out from centre camp, about a 15-minute walk through the empty "playa," or plain, is the man, a towering structure almost 20 metres tall, made of wood and neon lights, that will be set on fire the final night of the festival. To some, the man is a symbol of corporate America.

To others, he represents white, heterosexual man. The act of burning the man is a ritual of varying meaning: To all it is an acknowledgement that life is temporary and in constant need of renewal.

I can't see the man from where I am, so I park the car and figure on spending the day navigating the city and finding my friends. A temporary village carved out of the desert each year, Burning Man has never been this big. It started in 1986 on a San Francisco beach as a way to honour the solstice, and in 1990 moved to the desert. Two years ago, there were 10,000 participants. But then the media arrived, moving the festival into the mainstream and causing its surge in popularity. It has now become a major movement in North America, attracting people from all ages, incomes and classes to join in an experiment in creativity that has, so far, been extraordinarily successful.

As I walk past Neptune, Uranus and Saturn, I see throngs of topless women, whose breasts are painted in remarkable colours and designs, riding bicycles. There are naked men also, many riding bikes, and two men on stilts with orange velvet pants that are pushed down to show their private parts, to which they have attached long furry tails. A mobile lounge drives by, a motorcycle pulling two floats that contain couches and a bar. Some people are sitting on the couches, others are dancing. Another car passes by, this one right out of the Mad Max movie, without doors and with black metal scraps welded all over it. Then I see a moped decorated with a canopy of Indian scarves and beads, and a golf cart decorated with papier mache bugs and the guy driving it dressed up as an insect. I don't know where to look next.

Within minutes, the topless women become mundane compared to the tree sculpture made entirely of bones, and the "Gyna Hut" where women take Polaroids of their genitals and put them on display. A man walks up to me and asks, "Have you seen the giant vibrating penis?" and, incredibly, I say, "Why, yes. It's right over there," as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

In this surreal environment, everything seems possible. The wild euphoria puts me on edge and I feel like I'm on speed. Drugs seem irrelevant, but apparently a lot of people partake of ecstasy, mushrooms, acid and marijuana. I see stoned people everywhere, tripping out, but they are only one sector of the population. There are also spectators and tourists, although their presence is discouraged: One of the mantras of Burning Man is participation. There are new immigrants, urban refugees and the old-timers who will rant about how things have changed, spewing nostalgia for the times when the festival was small, when tickets were \$25, not \$125, when "raving" consisted of dancing to your car stereo, when you couldn't see the festival from the highway. Many are high-income earners: organizers say most people who attend the festival earn \$40,000 to \$80,000 (US) a year.

Like any city, Black Rock City offers sewage (porta-potties), postal service and bars, although you must barter for drinks. The infrastructure is incredible when you think it has all been set up for just a week and when it is taken down, volunteers spend months cleaning up so that the desert is as close to pristine as it was before the town was erected. Like any city, there are trends. This year, sarongs, forehead spikes, robot pets and Pop-Tarts are in. Last year, it was bindis, communal pools and glitter.

But in its evolution, Burning Man has mirrored the growth of any city, struggling with the burdens of size -- long bathroom lineups, overcrowding and crime -- and causing some to question how much bigger the festival can get before it collapses.

Its future aside, Burning Man offers the unprecedented and fascinating opportunity to watch how a diverse group of people creates a city from scratch. That given a tabula rasa, artists and revellers who are drawn to the desert to create such craziness, such sensory overload, says more about the world they left behind than the world they are building here. The bombardment of visual and aural stimulation is a direct reflection of today's insidious music video/computer culture and its far-reaching influence.

That the festival draws a lot of Internet and computer folks is no surprise. What is more surprising is that many of them are Canadian. In fact, there are so many Canadians at the festival that in three days, I can't find them all. They come to Burning Man to work as rangers, newspaper editors, greeters, artists. The "techies" are mostly from Vancouver; they have come to recruit new talent for their companies and this year, to build a hockey rink, without ice of course, out on the playa.

When I meet up with Team Canada, they are just setting up for the evening's game. The rink consists of plastic boards and huge floodlights that Dick Hardt drove over from Salt Lake City. Hardt, who runs his own software company in Vancouver and came to the festival despite pressing business matters at home, even had jerseys made for the team. The whole production cost him about \$4,000.

It is an absurd site, this rink in the middle of the desert. The rules are posted near the generator: "All games are self-refereed; organizers can sodomize anyone who refuses to play." Hardt, 36, says last year the Vancouverites brought helium balloons with them. "We realized we were two orders of magnitude away from doing something significant," he says. This year, he wanted to do something Canadian. "It's legendary. It's something people will remember. Plus it's totally different than anything else on the playa."

As the game begins, the lights of the distant city shimmer -- incredible for a town where the only power comes from portable electrical generators and strange battery-operated machines.

After the game, I walk through the dark, windy playa. A huge crowd of people with vehicles and floats has gathered around a circle to watch the fire breathers and the monster metal sculptures battle it out against one another. On the fringe of the crowd, I run into Dr. Megavolt who is standing in a spacesuit on top of a trailer and conducting lightning from a tesla coil into his head and his arms. It's an extremely dangerous act, and a ranger standing beside me who is also a pyrotechnician says he's never before seen a human serve as the ground for lightning. "Do you love Dr. Megavolt?" screams a man from a loudspeaker. "How much do you love Dr. Megavolt?" The crowd goes crazy. I think I will go deaf.

The fire from a distant metal battle is the only warmth in the freezing night. We gravitate closer to warm up and the only thing I can see are fires and giant metal sculptures burning. It's an apocalyptic vision, with clouds of smoke billowing into

the sky and red hot ashes streaming out toward the crowd. An announcer tells everyone to move downwind and, as the crowd separates, I can see people with firecrackers spewing from big hats on their heads. When I turn to leave, I see a huge dragon of lights moving across the playa.

I sleep in my car because of the cold. The electronic music pounds away into the night. When I wake up, the sun has crested the surrounding mountains, painting the city in an innocent pink light. I watch people begin to emerge from their tents and trailers and as I make coffee, I marvel at the bone-white cracks in the earth, the little hexagons of alkaline releasing a fine dust that coats cars and people, especially my feet, which after only one day are too filthy to look at.

The lineup for the bathroom is about 20-minutes long. Serenading us is an Asian man from Toronto who is playing Jimi Hendrix on an accordion. He's a great performer and by the time I get to the front of the line, he has everyone singing along. I make my way through the city to find Patrick at "Costco," which is obviously not the actual megastore, but, here at Burning Man, a soulmate trading company. Under the open tent, there are people lounging on couches and people making pancakes. Patrick says he has "the best job in the desert," better at least than the job he left behind in Mission, B.C., at a Chinese restaurant.

Here, he says, he gets to meet "awesome" people and hook them up with their soulmates. He explains the application process and how they take digital photos of everyone, send all the information via computer to the Costco headquarters in Seattle where the pairings are made.

"Costco is the only corporate presence allowed at the festival," he says. But it's all a spoof, an anti-corporate message at an anti-corporate event. When Patrick sees my skepticism, he introduces me to the general manager who tells me 40% of Costco's camp is Canadian. "We're afraid we'll have a hostile takeover," he says. "There may be a strike by this afternoon."

They take this charade very seriously, but it doesn't feel hostile here at "Costco" this morning. Lethargic maybe. The heat is overwhelming and everyone is drinking water. The Burning Man festival's alternative newspaper, *Piss Clear*, makes it a priority to let everyone know that if their urine isn't clear, they're not drinking enough. Between swigs of water, Patrick tells me this is his second Burning Man. He had to pinch pennies at his minimum-wage job to get here, but what draws him is the community. "Day-to-day life in our society is fairly bland," he says. "Everything seems more real here. People are more real." He tells me the actual burning of the man carries different symbolism for different people. "But for me," he says, "it's just a really good reminder that life isn't all TV or Hollywood or isolated shopping malls."

Because the festival is commercial free -- no corporate logos can be displayed (except Costco and that's because it's a joke); no vending is allowed; bartering for food and costumes is commonplace -- the festival attracts people in search of an alternative to an empty, alienating urban life. It strikes me that many people at Burning Man seem to want to experience a kind of life that is no longer possible on the outside, a place where community is crucial, and ritual, in the pilgrimage to a remote location and the symbolic burning of the man, offers meaning and faith in the

creation of something sacred.

"What people need is to feel something larger than themselves, beyond themselves and, through this experience, a presence of some kind, something sympathetic to their souls," said Larry Harvey, the founder of Burning Man, at a speech one afternoon. "This is a spiritual event."

It certainly is for Zac Bolan, who is camped with his fellow Canadians and his 19-year-old daughter, at Hubcamp. We sit under the shade of a tent canopy, watching the people walk by on Venus and drinking beer. Zac, from Calgary, is the operations manager of the daily *Black Rock Gazette* and the Canadian representative for Burning Man. He explains how they deliver the paper to Kinko's in Reno via a high-speed Internet uplink.

They print the paper there and drive it out to the festival every day in exchange for free tickets to the event. "It's a miracle of technology what's done here," he says. "It makes it a real city."

A young woman with a tattoo and multiple piercings interrupts us to thank Zac "for this morning." They hug and she tells him excitedly how she is learning to walk on stilts and how last night, she tried Tabasco and tequila shooters. When she leaves, Zac, who's wearing white rubber pants and orange goggles, tells me he is already, a day before the festival ends, going into withdrawal and beginning to miss people. Burning Man, he says, has changed his life. After the first festival, he quit his job. After the second festival, he got out of a long-term relationship. This year, he plans to take control of his time.

Not all of the Canadians over at the centre

of Hubcamp share his enthusiasm. Nina Krieger, a 21-year-old cultural history student from Vancouver, says she's skeptical of the fervour of some of the festival's participants and its cult-like following. "I'm interested in the idea of a community built from scratch, but weirdness for the sake of weirdness, I don't know." She says she hasn't seen anything really beautiful, that all the art is quite ugly. "It's interesting that's what people choose to create," she says. "And I'm not sure what that says about society. Is it people looking for culture, for something to believe in, for rituals like burning the man?"

On the last night of the festival, the procession out to the man begins. It is dusk and the anticipation of the actual burning of the man creates a nervous energy in the throngs of people walking out into the playa beside me. People in full costume are holding hands, hugging, laughing, screaming, "Burn the man," talking about what it was like last year and what kind of art they're going to create next year.

As the crowd gathers, I find my place beside one of the street lights -- tall, majestic structures that hold four propane lanterns to light the way from centre camp to the man. I stand on an empty bucket and look behind me. I can't see the end of the people.

The hours pass and the man, who is being stuffed full of fireworks, hasn't even been raised. The volunteer rangers call on large men in the audience to help pull him up with a rope. The crowd begins to get antsy and I'm convinced there will be a riot. Then, the man is up and everyone is on their feet screaming, trying to penetrate the inner circle where only media and fire

technicians are allowed for safety reasons. Then, there is a short in the neon that is lighting up the man and he unexpectedly goes up in flames. A few people who have been standing at the base of the man run for their lives as the fireworks spew and the fire rages. The head falls off first, then the arms and, as huge, red-hot cinders fly through the air, the crowd flies toward the man, dancing and drumming and singing.

The difficulties the Burning Man organizers had in lighting the man weren't the only problems at the festival this year. There were 90 drug-related "emergencies" a day. There was at least one overdose while the man was being burned. Someone set off a bomb days into the event; and the day before the burn, a man jumped off a scaffold and ended up in critical condition in a Reno hospital.

"Read the ticket," says Zac when I ask him about these problems. It says: "You voluntarily assume the risk of serious injury or death by attending this event." Right now, this is the fifth largest city in Nevada, he says. Per capita, there is more violence and crime in regular cities. "Extreme art will attract extreme people and some of them are self-abusive," he says. "But for the most part, they're a creative and inspired bunch of community-minded people."

As I walk past the fire pits and groups of people lying stoned around disco balls and people dancing in rave tents, I think about Zac's question. "Did you get it?" he kept asking me. "Did you get Burning Man?" He means: am I already thinking about next year? In the distance, I hear the hockey game, a million different strands of electronic music and strangely, church bells. It's a contagious euphoria, but I don't

know if I'll be back next year. I'm not sure anyone does. In the coming months, there will be a lot of discussion on the Internet about whether this festival has outgrown itself. Only one thing is certain, there will be many a "decompression" party for Burning Man survivors in Vancouver, and across the country, and I plan to attend as many of them as I possibly can.

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