Burning Man

By Steve Matthews

Founder: Larry Harvey (January 11, 1948 – present)
Founded: 1986
Headquarters: San Francisco, CA


INTRODUCTION

Burning Man\(^1\) is one of well over one hundred worldwide *Transformational Festivals* that have become hugely popular in the past few decades.\(^2\) These several day outdoor events typically attract a countercultural crowd and have many themes in common such as: a rejection of traditional thinking in regards to institutions (e.g. capitalism, commercialism, organized religion), social norms (e.g. nudity, moral judgments), advocate experimentation (e.g. socially, sexually, spiritually), temporary communities, alternate identities and costumes, visionary artwork, electronic dance music, rave-like parties, New Age/Pagan/Eastern/mystical spirituality, and efforts to raise one’s consciousness and experience personal transformation through various (mainly Eastern and occult) techniques and practices. Burning Man has steadily grown from its beginning as a small event attended by a handful of people to a multimillion dollar sold out event with a fanatical worldwide following which seeks to transform the entire world with “Burning Man culture.” It has attracted many of the biggest celebrities and cultural leaders\(^3\) and has garnered significant media attention with mixed reviews.

Burning Man could be defined as an annual week-long festival where people from all over the world come to build a temporary city in a harsh desert environment in order to participate in creating and experiencing art, community and spirituality, all with radical self-expression without judgment. This temporary city, which appears and then disappears just a week later without a trace, goes by the name of Black Rock City (BRC). This city is built in the shape of a huge horseshoe on a vast alkaline desert lakebed called “the playa.” A wooden man figure somewhere around forty feet tall is built and set to stand on what is usually a forty-foot-high base which raised in the center of the opening of the city, where it is burned in front of thousands of celebrating people on the Saturday evening of the event. There is no specified meaning or given interpretation of the Man, which is the unifying symbol of the festival. The huge Man effigy can be seen from just about anywhere in the city, and especially when darkness falls as he is lit with colorful neon lighting. A large and elaborate Temple is also erected on the playa not far from the Man, and that too is burned on the following and concluding night of the event. While the burning of the Man is a celebratory event surrounded by much fanfare and partying, the burning of the Temple is a very somber and introspective event often accompanied by tears and sorrow. The burning of the Temple has in recent years taken a hugely important place in each year’s burn, only following the central significance of the burning of the Man.

The event is known for its art, community, and spirituality, it is also known for its electronic dance music stages, nudity, wild partying, orgies, drinking, drugs (the latter of which is not condoned by the leadership), and its general all around hedonism. Nothing is free from criticism and irreverent mockery, be it consumerism, government, corporations, societal standards, or religion. Everything is about experimentation and all judgments are to be left at the front gate. When one comes to Burning Man one is now in a “petri dish” and is working on a “blank canvas” where one can truly express his or herself socially, sexually, artistically, or spiritually. Such experimentation and free expression are very easy at Burning Man since visitors to the playa are now functioning with a basic anonymity far away from their homes in a type of a virtual world where there are no rules or judgments. For some the annual event is about having a chance to party, experiment, get
wild and do things that one could never do within the confines of conventional society, but for others Burning Man is a blueprint for a utopic society and is part of a mission for planetary transformation. Ten Principles have been created to define Burning Man culture and to guide one’s behavior at the event – “radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy.” The expansion of these Ten Principles into the “default world” is at the very core of The Burning Man Project in its mission to transform the world.

Burning Man is a private ticketed event held on federal land overseen by the government agency, the Bureau of Land Management. Because of the impact to the environment, tickets are capped at a limit of somewhere near 70,000 attendees. Tickets have sold out quickly since 2011, and it is common for tickets to be sold for several times their face value. An annual theme is announced by the leadership for each year’s burn. This theme is often reflected in the base on which the Man stands, and in the specially constructed art cars and mutant vehicles which slowly drive around the playa, as well as in the many theme camps created by the burners to compose Black Rock City. Burners will also decorate themselves and their bicycles (the preferred method of travel) and will take on new identities or personas for the week of the burn. There are no spectators, just participants at the event where everyone gets the chance to be an artist. Large and small scale pieces of art are both created and shared by burners in an environment where anything and everything goes.

Surviving the week-long event is a challenge in itself. Miles from the closest city, burners leave family and friends to endure often harsh desert conditions to camp out (in tents, motorhomes, or geodesic domes) on a dry, dusty sulfuric lakebed with no real contact with the outside world. Electricity, running water, cell phone signals, and other conveniences are left behind for a week in the desert.

**HISTORY**

Burning Man has both an “official” origin story and an alternative account. Some of the earliest participants and insiders claim their reports constitute the real or true story behind Burning Man. According to the official story, Burning Man began in 1986 when Larry Harvey decided for reasons which needed no justification, to go down to San Francisco’s Baker Beach and burn an eight-foot wooden man which he had built along with his carpenter friend Jerry James. A handful of people who were on the beach gathered to watch the burning of the figure. A year later this ritual was again repeated on the day of the following summer solstice; this time the Man had grown to fifteen feet and the on looking crowd had now grown to around 40. The next year, in 1998, adventurous members of a local prank group called The Cacophony Society decided to attend the burn. Through this alliance the Cacophonists became burners and the burners became Cacophonists and a whole new type of experimentation was introduced into this new and evolving group. The next major change to the event was when the police arrived on Baker Beach to shut down the igniting of the now forty-foot man who was to be sacrificed at the 1990 burn. Not wanting to cancel that year’s burning of the Man, the Cacophonists and the burners decided to take the Man out into the remote Black Rock Desert and burn him out there on that year’s Labor Day weekend. With about 90 people making the trip, desert survival was introduced along with the idea of being able to do pretty much whatever they wanted to do far away from the watchful eye of society. In the early years at the event’s new home, members engaged in reckless activities such as high speed driving across the playa, shooting at things they had brought, and lots of partying and drug use. In 1992, through the inspiration of a group of artists called Desert Siteworks, art was introduced into Burning Man.

In 1996 awareness of the event was increased after Wired magazine published a cover story. In addition to this, the increased use of the internet boosted the groups visibility. The year 2000 also marked a significant change to Burning Man as the Temple was first introduced onto the playa. While originally conceived as an art piece, shortly before the burn the Temple was designated as a place where people could come to face and heal from loss in their lives. It is critical to understand how most burners see the Temple as the spiritual heart of Burning Man and as an instrument of healing and closure for their pain and loss. Visitors to the Temple will write their innermost thoughts on its walls and will bring important objects with them (like the photograph of a recently lost relative, a toy of a deceased child, or a suicide note of a friend) and leave these things inside of the Temple to be consumed by its impending flames. When the words or objects are turned to smoke and ash the burner uses this as a mechanism to create a break from the associated pain from that loss and to experience closure from it. In 2016 the Burning Man Project purchased a 3,800-acre piece of land called “Fly Ranch” a short distance away from its event home, the playa. The future use of this land has not yet been defined, but it has been hinted that this may become
the home to new art installations and be used for a possible experiment in a year-round Burning Man community.

The alternative accounts differ somewhat from the official published history. According to critics, the founder and “Chief Philosopfic Officer” Larry Harvey is often portrayed as the sole creative force behind Burning Man and has said, “I’m not really a joiner. And I like to stand off and watch how people behave. I never had to join anything, people joined me.” A study of Burning Man history shows that Harvey has indeed assimilated ideas from a number of individuals and sources and not only has gone so far as to not give credit to those sources, but he has also deliberately written many of them out of its history. The Man was inspired by the 1973 British horror film The Wicker Man, Sir James Fraiser’s The Golden Bough (which also described the burning of wicker men), and from his friendship with Mary Grauberger who used to burn artwork on Baker Beach. The trips to the playa and the experimentation came directly from Harvey’s interaction with the Cacophony Society. The idea of a temporary community and its identity as an art festival clearly came from Harvey’s connection with artist William Binzen and his Desert Siteworks art community. Furthermore, the entire story about the burning of the first Man as a spontaneous act appears to be a fabrication because Harvey’s original effigy is reported to have been built as a reference to his ex-wife Patricia which he wanted to burn as an act of vengeance following a family quarrel outside of her house, but his friends talked him out of this and had him burn it on the nearby Baker Beach instead. Those taking issue with the official history note that nearly all sanctioned accounts seem to be designed to give undue creative credit to Harvey and his organization while ignoring many of the contributions of the numerous others who have helped shape the event into what it is today.

**BURNING MAN SPIRITUALITY**

Burning Man has become a more spiritual event since the introduction of the Temple in the year 2000. Although an atheist, Larry Harvey openly admits that Burning Man is a “spiritual movement.” The majority of burners describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” meaning that do not adhere to traditional monotheistic religions but instead are more drawn to a do-it-yourself eclectic type of spirituality derived from Eastern, mystical, Pagan, New Age, and occult sources. Burning Man’s spirituality can be described as postmodern New Age paganism.

Everyone who attends the burn receives a guidebook (the “What Where When” guide) to the many events, workshops, and speaker series that occur throughout the week all over the playa. This guidebook is easily the best indicator of the morality and spirituality that arises from Burning Man culture. Event titles such as “Queer Sex Magic,” “ATTOL’s Famous Orgy Dome,” “BDSM Rites of Passage,” “Gender Bender Night at the Booby Bar” and “Satan’s School for Sluts” show the perverted and hedonistic side of what goes on. Burning spirituality is exemplified by events such as “Channeling Voices from Other Dimensions,” “On Attaining Buddhahood in This Lifetime,” “Wiccan Spell Rhythm,” “Taste of Kabbalah,” and “Kundalini Yoga Through the Chakras.” Shamanism and Tantra are also very popular at Burning Man as is evidenced by workshops like “Shamanism, Psychedelics & Neuroscience,” “Animal Totem Meditation,” “Advanced Shamanistic Technique,” “Tantra, Energy Flow, Sacred Sex” and “Tantric Touch for Intimate Partners.”

Many who attend Burning Man describe it as “transformative,” “empowering,” or even “life-changing.” This transformation is experienced as attendees are able to experiment and break free of the confining expectations and limitations of conventional societal norms in any and all areas that can be imagined. Many find personal breakthroughs by spending months working on elaborate pieces of artwork which they take to the playa and then sometimes burn. Others claim an experience of transformation as a result of their participation in the burning of the Temple. For many of those who attend Burning Man it is an adventure in survival, creativity, and community. For others the emphasis of the event is likened to a spiritual retreat where one can set aside time to look within and focus on the more spiritual side of the event.

The “spiritual” nature of Burning Man has birthed a blanket openness and acceptance to all kinds of behavior. While radical acceptance and self-expression gives the thought of a loving and open society the practicality of this has caused serious problems. The party atmosphere along with a lack of moral structure at Burning Man frequently leads to rapes, fights, and thefts from break-ins to vehicles and campsites. Rape on the playa has become so prevalent that a pamphlet about what to do if confronted by a rapist has been handed out by the Greeters to everyone when entering the playa. The principle of “radical self-expression” encourages burners not only to reject their previous allegiances to social and moral norms accepted by mainstream society, and instead transform and replace these frameworks with a hyper-relativistic perspective where not only anything goes, but one where anything, no matter how deviant or controversial it is, is to be encouraged.
CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

From a Christian perspective the greatest danger with Burning Man is not its lawlessness or its hedonism – it is that burners generally are using Burning Man as a replacement for having a relationship with God. The eclectic spirituality practiced by many burners is not concerned with rationality, consistency, or even any lack of contradictions. One can experiment and participate in any number of practices that fundamentally disagree with each other in concepts or worldviews as long as they can all fit into one’s do-it-yourself eclectic spiritual shopping cart. Rationality and critical thinking are replaced by good feelings and a pursuit of experiences which are typically derived from Eastern mystical or occultist teachings and practices, while Christ and Christianity are often irreverently and publicly mocked. Most burners will look within for the divine instead of looking up or outside of themselves to a personal and loving Creator ( Isa. 41:10; Rom. 8:38-39), mistaking the image of God within (Gen.1:26) for the essence of God within. The typical burner will also hold to a belief in reincarnation, which again is in opposition to the clear teaching and revelation of Scripture (Heb. 9:27).

Should Christians attend Burning Man? While a major draw to the event is the artwork, the hedonistic atmosphere also provides unique temptations such as rampant nudity, sexual promiscuity, and non-stop partying with lots of access to drinking and drugs. Over the years many Christian groups have gone to Burning Man to share their faith in the irreverent and partying space of the playa, but it is not recommended that believers should try this alone. Instead of going alone, if a Christian were indeed to go he or she should only go with a group where there is a high level of support, accountability, and prayer to keep oneself pure from this activity (1 Pet. 4:3f; Gal. 5:19-21).

Transformational Festivals like Burning Man present opportunities like adventure, artistry, a close community, and a wide array of experiences. However, these things can never truly replace divine forgiveness and a relationship with one’s Creator. While the burn can offer a lot of interesting experiences, it does nothing to direct one’s ultimate destiny towards the only true transformation and healing that comes through Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 5:17; Matt.9:12-13, 11:28). The real answers in life cannot be found in a Man who is sacrificed every year in the desert, but in Him who was sacrificed two thousand years ago “once for all” (Heb. 10:10).

Notes

1 Burning Man’s official website: www.burningman.org
4 The Ten Principles of Burning Man may be found at: http://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/
5 This is the day by day world outside the playa, or “home” to the burner.
6 Standard tickets cost $390; while other types are sold for $900, $990 and $1,200.
8 The Cacophony Society was a local group of adventures that grew out of another similar group known as The Suicide Club. They would meet together to engage in everything from street theatre, pranks and defacing/changing billboards to make passions they felt within the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society.”
13 A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: Robert Velarde, “Yoga,” Profile Notebook (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2016). A complete collection of Profiles (over 450 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at http://www.watchman.org/staff/jwalker/ProfileYoga.pdf.
14 A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: James C. Ventress, “Anismism,” Profile Notebook (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2016).
15 These events and workshops are all listed in various recent editions of the annual “What Where When” guides published by the Burning Man organization.
17 www.watchman.org/staff/jwalker/ProfileYoga.pdf
21 A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject: Robert Velarde, “Yoga,” Profile Notebook (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2016). A complete collection of Profiles (over 450 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at http://www.watchman.org/staff/jwalker/ProfileYoga.pdf.
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