

review

festival

Instant Culture in the Desert:
Burning Man 2002
 by Elnor Buhard

Instant Culture in the High Desert

Late summer brings the Burning Man festival to the flat sands of northwestern Nevada. This experimental culture takes form as a city – Black Rock City – which hosts an impressive array of cultural factions: hippies, newagers, candy ravers, punks, the occasional post-apocalyptic death cult, body-artists, drummers, shamans, drug gurus, acrobats, fire breathers, technophiles, nudists, massage therapists, welders, dogs, metalheads, mechanics, divas, lost kids, and the occasional bored suburbanite. The participants, armed with food, water, and shelter, gather together in a bustling collection of makeshift outposts with odd missions - New Year's Day: a group from New York, dedicated to celebrating New Year's Eve each and every day; Antarctica: a giant refrigerated cave where people trade sunstroke for frostbite; Big Puffy Yellow Camp: dedicated to everything that is big, puffy, and yellow; the Volunteer Pyro Department: helping you set things on fire; Camp Dickface, where gentlemen (or ladies with strap-ons) can replace a celebrity's nose with their very own phallus; Eggchair: mysteriously centered around an oval chair; and the Thunderdome: a giant floating arena of violence.

Perhaps the only thing that holds this eclectic conglomeration together is a culture of giving, honesty, acceptance, and experimentation that has been slowly cultivated as the event has grown in size (with a population of 30,000, Black Rock City was the 7th largest city in Nevada). The keystone of the festival is the philosophy of participation - if you aren't giving to the festival than you are a spectator, subject to being heckled, decorated, entertained, massaged, paraded, interrupted in any imaginable way. Like all things at Burning Man, this maxim is not absolute: the Spectator Camp drives around a

giant set of bleachers encouraging people to just watch. The act of giving to the community is a reward in and of itself, and the more personal and unique the gift, the better. It is this accelerated sharing that is responsible for the festival's success - as participants return year after year with larger and more intricate installations, vehicles, costumes, games and performances. As one might expect in such a diverse sea of experience, there is little concern for refinement - it is more the contribution to the overwhelming diversity, the uniqueness of what someone does that matters.

Many large sculptures, such as the Mausoleum, are built throughout the week, then burned at the end of the festival



Advice for first-time attendees: get lost as soon as possible. Leave your friends from your hometown and wander across the desert to the nearest distant blinking light, motorized fuzzy cat, magic carpet, or equally magic bus to cross your path. There you will find crowds of people playing games that you are advised to go along with. Have someone throw you through the floor and ingest whatever they offer. If you aren't dressed yet, then dress, or revert to your natural skin. Amongst these people there is as much love as hate, flesh puddles trade places with wrestling and explosions. Attention hounds with megaphones heckle the suddenly smitten. Here, where an evening jaunt across the desert can transform, there is always something to do (take a group shower? fix your bike? have your genitals painted? burn money? eat fresh tuna? get sold into slavery? go skydiving?). Whatever your curiosity, the Burning Man festival will give you new ways to explore it.



Participants build elaborate enclosures, such as this shrine



Burning Man 2002's theme: *the floating world*, encouraged attendees to build boats, waves, and fish.

Burning Man is an exorbitant party supported by a rather dramatic social experiment. Privacy, property, and personal boundaries are scarce. Money is seen as tacky, bartering petty, and gift is the preferred method of exchange. Along with these loose notions of possession come free ideas of personal spaces, both physical and mental. Conversations at Burning Man are often collective - spreading across and through groups of people. Wearing a tacky sweater? You are sure to be informed of this fact, but it is no reason not to laugh. Similarly, participant's physical bodies become collectivized and augmented, moved around and touched, sometimes without permission, but never with creepy intentions.

Wandering across the desert: hot, sunny, out of water, still tripping, looking for the nearest ride, when suddenly out the corner of my eye – an 8-axle dragon, breathing fire, came scuttling across the flat sand. Inside, on the floor, they're passed out looking at the stars, naked rolling around, with small light installations, an altar that serves as an anonymous food exchange, as the vehicle approaches loud music, a small crowd outside dancing with fire. Two people on a golf cart roll by shouting obscenities. The dragon itself is overflowing with people wearing synthetic furs, toys, and body paint, joking and screaming. Burning Man, this year, in fuller swing than ever.