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“Death could scarce be more bitter than that place! But since it came to good, I will recount all that I found revealed there by God’s grace.”

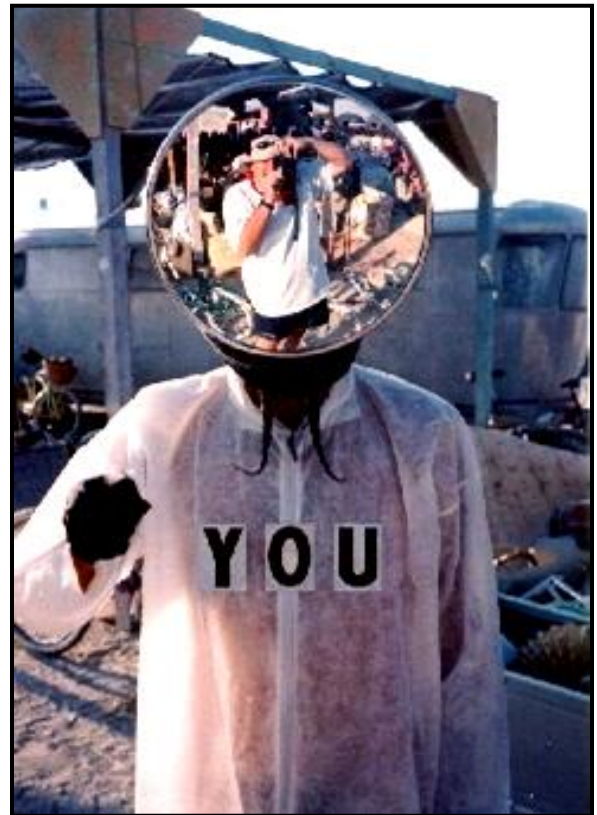
Dante’s Inferno, Canto I

Truth is elusive ... and illusive ... at Burning Man festival in Nevada desert

By **RON FRANSCCELL**
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Desert air gushes in your open car window as Three Dog Night plays on the oldies station. Mama told you not to come, but you came anyway. And then the radio fades out completely as you cross some invisible threshold, and you are alone with the electric hum and the Nevada heat.

Up ahead, the skyline of a mirage city rises from a primordial lake bed. You follow a Prankster bus off the pavement onto a path paved in talcum-like dust. This is the playa, the hardpan. You pass through its gritty veil into the outskirts of Black Rock City, a fleeting settlement that didn’t exist a week ago and won’t exist a week hence. You have come to witness the Burning of the Man, a marvelously primitive ritual that started on a San Francisco beach in 1986 and now draws nearly 30,000 to the northern Nevada desert in the waning days of summer.



It means many things to many people. Except to you. You have no idea.

So they stop you at the gate because you carry the mark of the virgin, a first-timer. A bulging man in a summer dress asks you to get out of

your car and spread-eagles you across the fender. You are the weakest link, and a woman who looks like Anne Robinson, part-librarian and part-dominatrix, spanks you with a rubber chicken. You are not in Kansas anymore.

No, this is the Burning Man Festival. A surreal experiment in tribalism. A sprawling camp in Nevada's Black Rock Desert resembling a forward bivouac in the Gulf War. A desperately desolate Disneyland where every ride is an E-ticket. A post-apocalyptic playground where absinthe is more valued than gasoline, and water more than absinthe. Where odd flying insects emerge at dusk, and some are human. Where people believe you aren't really alive unless you are slightly off-balance, as if equilibrium were a disability. Where social renegades can finally feel part of a group. Salvador Dali meets Mad Max, as told to Dante.

"This," says a San Francisco physicist known as Dr. Lizard, "is not a festival. It is a forum."



"This," says Stephen Raspa, a Bay Area artist whose face is obscured by a mirror and, thus, by your own face, "is human imagination."

"This," says one-time Weather Underground fugitive Jeffrey David Powell of Denver, as he rubs your shoulders with sweet-scented oil, "is not a cure for anything. It's a possibility. It doesn't just show people how to live outside the box, it shows there is a box."

Black Rock City is not a box. It is an isolated horseshoe in the middle of nowhere, and that's the way they like it. The doomed Man stands at its center, and the city's streets splay outward from Him like the hours on a clock, from 2 to 10. All roads lead to the Man. Eight cross-streets ring the camp, from the inner Infant to the outer Oblivion.

At dawn one morning, you are greeted by a naked woman serving cool melon slices from a silver platter at the corner of 2:30 and Oblivion. You recycle your used eating utensils in the Spoon Return Camp at 6:30 and Infant.

And nobody will tell you the exact address of Fornication Station, except it's somewhere on the lane that is Lover. Duh.

Motel 666 lies beyond the limits of the city – not to mention decency – like some demonic roadhouse. You can check in to watch plump lesbian

belly-dancers in a homoerotic pole-dance, or five naughty Santas strip naked. You can chat in the dark with a leopard-skinned economics grad student who yearns to be a novelist. Anything to forget the bartender swizzled your cocktail with his fingers.

You will find whatever you seek at Burning Man. Art. Love. Sex. Sunburn. Intoxication. Conversation. Inspiration. Or just a free shampoo beneath the Sign of Protuberant Gumby.

Everyone comes for something different. You don't know where, but you crossed an invisible line in the desert someplace. On the other side, you live your life; on this side, you invent the life you should have. Everyone crosses, leaving old lives, inhibitions, reality, expectations, and truth at the gate. Whatever is missing is conjured here. The moment is now. Live in it.

The uber-rule is "no spectators," but you can't help looking. Radical self-expression requires an audience. Participants come from every state, many foreign countries, three dimensions, and at least two solar systems: drag queens, nudists, rebels with and without causes, suburban thrill-seekers, dot-commers, ravers, techno-geeks, survivalists, street-corner philosophers, gawkers, taggers, endgame freaks, New Age drifters, artists, yahoos, poltroons, children and dogs. To name a few.

They come in every age and size, although they are predominantly youngish and white. Maybe that's

because Burning Man is an Internet phenomenon, or maybe young, white folks have a cultural vacuum where their sense of community should be. One thing's for sure: Burning Man features more piercings than the Battle of Falkirk.

Not unlike the real world, campers gather in loose "neighborhoods." Some are closed to outsiders, but you will fit someplace. You share food, water, booze, ideas and, to some degree, suffering. It is not camping, per se, but an urban vision of camping in which the city simply relocates to tents, trailers and RVs for a week.

The cacophony of the Information Age is deafening. You can tune your radio to one of 40 or so low-power radio stations, some broadcasting from the backs of bicycles. You can read one of the camp's two daily newspapers. Since many of the campers come from the Silicon Valley, wireless Internet is available.

Burning Man is no cheap vacation. For a week, you spend at least \$1,000 for a ticket (average \$200), food, water, gas, travel, personal items, camping gear and trade goods. But many "Burners" spend far more. Artists haul mammoth artworks in semis. Hard-core partyers drag their own dance clubs, saloons and grandstands. Emerald City - a throbbing electronic dance floor beneath neon-green spires, serving green cocktails and spraying green lasers on mountainsides miles away - is rumored to have cost more than \$100,000.



But your money is only good for a cup of coffee and a bag of ice on the playa; everything else must be bartered. You buy the time of day with a joke. A soda with a condom. A pair of socks with a kiss. And sometimes you get what you want by simply being grateful. The gift economy is the heart of the Burning Man. Ecstasy is common, both the drug and the emotion. You offer hash to a fellow camper and she assumes it is the kind you smoke, not the kind you eat. Mushrooms and pot circulate, but liquor is still the drug of choice, but this ain't no downstream booze. In a crowd, the guy beside you passes a bottle of expensive cognac.

Everything tastes foreign here. You engage a German fraulein in a

discussion of the leitmotif of death and bad teeth in Thomas Mann's novels. A Pole tells you the idiots in Romania are building a Count Dracula theme park. A Brazilian high on shrooms tells you a long and fascinating story in Portuguese, and you smile because you don't speak Portuguese. But you don't speak San Franciscan either, and it hasn't appreciably obstructed your understanding of Black Rock City's largely Bay Area populace.

Half the fun is not dying. Day-time temperatures soar over 100; nights plunge toward freezing. The sun is relentless on the treeless playa. The ancient wind can rip diaphanous silk like a broadsword through butter. And the pervasive dust laughs at tightly closed spaces. If it rains, it becomes chocolate cream pie. So you make your own shade, wear bug-eye goggles, slather sunscreen, and wrap your mouth and nose to block the dust. Or you go naked, one with the Sun God. Feel the Burn.

Myth happens

You cannot believe everything you hear on the playa. In fact, it's best to believe nothing and demand proof. People make up new names, new lives, new stories. The truth is illusive and elusive. When the goal is "radical self-expression," myth happens.

Like the myth of the Burning Man himself. You'll hear a yarn about how Larry Harvey and his friend Jerry James burned a wooden man on the beach in San Francisco in 1986 to patch

Larry's broken heart, exorcise a failed love affair, or pay homage to his father. They aren't true, in the true sense, but they are myths and myths are just lies we choose to believe.

Whatever you seek, it's on the playa. You can compete in the world's largest rock-scissors-paper tournament. Attend a workshop on sadomasochism. Participate in an Egyptian death ritual. Thumb a ride on a missile. Sign a petition to eliminate songwriter Randy Newman. Get lost in a maze. Run naked behind the water truck for a traveling shower. Visit the autoerotic asphyxiation camp. Skip the light fandango in a hundred all-night raves.

Nights can be sinister. That's when the denizens emerge in full regalia under a gibbous moon. They howl as the sun sets behind the mountains. Some clamber over Thunder Dome to watch tethered combatants. Others sway to trance music until sunrise, or sleep naked under the stars on a bed of dirt.

You might think there are no rules in this radical new community, but rules abound. Rangers patrol. Signs warn. You are reminded repeatedly to be "excrementally correct." And citizens enforce their own codes on the spot. A man wearing a NASCAR cap is scorned by Burners because corporate advertising is the bane of the real world ... but a man in a full Nazi uniform is merely expressing himself. Irony can be thicker than dust at Burning Man.

Then the Man burns. After an orgiastic hour of fire dancing and

fireworks, He is torched. Towering 70 feet over the playa, the Man bursts into flames. The intense heat spawns small tornadoes and glowing embers swarm toward heaven like insane fireflies. When He finally collapses in a red-hot heap, the crowd rushes forward to dance around His cremated bones.

Like any good wake, the party lasts all night.

Back to the old life

At dawn, the wind still howls to the north. As you load out, you imagine a drift of glitter, truth and inhibitions lost forever in some far corner of northern Nevada.

The exit road is lined with signs, like Burma Shave, except they quote Shakespeare. We are the stuff such as dreams are made of, they say.

You return to the pavement beneath serene mountains no longer painted with laser beams. Hot desert air rushes in your open car window as Kansas plays on the oldies station, familiar, safe, unthrobbing. You blow down the highway like some time-traveling, shooting-star SUV trailing playa dust in the wind. And once again you cross that invisible threshold into the old life, back to the McDonald's and the safety of cortisone cream.

Ho-hum, just another week in the post-apocalypse. You turn up the oldies and buy doughnuts at the first C-store, but you drive for two days before you wipe your dashboard clean of Burning Man's ashes.