

The Burning Man Arts Festival

Note: This is a (rather long winded) collection of my memories of Burning Man. Some of my facts are probably off, and others have been changed to make telling the stories easier--no one actually referred to it as "2 o'clock Street" or "Adapt Avenue", but I figured that everything was confusing enough already. I tired to take as few photos as possible while there, so I'm relying on the photographs of others. Please let me know if you object, although only my friends and family will be looking at this page, regardless. In addition, I decided to take as few pictures as I could. I knew that among the 43,000 other participants, someone else would have a better camera and might even be a better photographer. However, I didn't ask permission to use the photos here, and could only credit them to the online handles of the photographers. On my 'blog, at least, I have links to their respective websites.

At any rate:

Two things are come into existence every year in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. The first is the Burning Man Arts Festival, a place for thousands of artists to create their art (mostly sculptural, often highly interactive) in an area that is damn near free from constraint. There's no ceiling, no mountains, and not even a hill for miles, so if you want to build a thirty-foot-tall tree, there's nothing to stop you. And it's the middle of the desert, so if you want that tree to spit fire ten feet into the air, well, there's no reason not to do that as well. Each year some of the most creative artists gather to build whatever they'd like.

The second entity to spring into existence each year is Black Rock City, the tenth largest city in Nevada (population 43,000 people, this year). It is entirely comprised of people who are there to participate in the Arts Festival and so after a single week it vanishes again, not unlike Brigadoon. And just like Brigadoon there is no way to tell that it was ever there--the citizens are committed to a philosophy called "leave no trace". It's a full fledged city, with streets (laid out in a vast circle, and numbered like a clock), avenues (labeled alphabetically, running from Adapt through Lineage, ringing the center) and sanitation (lord-knows how many port-a-potties, and a string of sewage trucks constantly emptying them).

The art festival was truly amazing, but it was the City itself that got me to most excited. Standing at the intersection of Radical Self-Sufficiency and Intentional Community, it was an utterly different form of society. The cultural norms included responsibility, respect, hospitality, and absolute generosity. There was little room for shame, misanthropy, or ideological supremacy. I plan to discuss this all as soon as I can, for like I say it was these experiences that I found the most life changing. However, I'll start with the art.

The art is the lifeblood of the City, and it flows throughout every nook and cranny from the grandest 200-person Camp up front out to the smallest single-person trailer down on Lineage Avenue. However, the largest works of art are located in the circle three-quarters of a mile across in the center. The is a circle of completely flat, harshly baked desert, ringed on three sides by the City. On the fourth quadrant, from 10 o'clock Street around to 2 o'clock, it is allowed to stretch far back to the empty desert. So what did I see?



(Photo by siberfi)

The Man

Well, I'll start with The Man. A twenty-foot-tall stick figure, the Man stood on a twenty-foot-tall platform. It was made entirely out of two-by-fours, but it looked like a huge thorn bush (and was referred to as the "Tangled Bank", referencing *The Origin of Species*), with the Man standing proudly on top. At night he was outlined by white and yellow neon, and there was a tiny red neon sculpture of a monkey (for the theme was Evolution this year) on his chest.

The whole time I was there, the Man stood watch over us all, the tallest thing around (more or less) and glowing at night. Occupying the precise center of the circle as it did, we used the Man as a way to get our bearings, when we could. Occasionally the dust storms would obscure him from sight entirely (occasionally they would obscure everything from sight, leaving a view of less than three feet!) and some wit would remark that he had been stolen, or had escaped the burning this year. But for the most part he was a constant guide.



(Photo by cookinghamus)

On the night of the burn, Saturday night, there was a really fearsome dust storm and everyone was worried. The storm had been so bad in 2008 that they had cancelled the ceremony--they just waited around for a break in the wind, and then set it ablaze as soon as they could. Skipping the ceremony was a big deal: fire dancers from all over the world had auditioned for a spot on the Fire Conclave (the performing group of around 1,200 of the best dancers) and then spent the year practicing for that one night. Everyone was sincerely hoping that it would not get canceled again.

We left for the spot where we had last seen the Man in a group of six. We were all wearing glow sticks and electroluminescent wire, which allowed the last person in line to barely make out the glow from the first person--apart from that the dust had erased every other sight. After walking what felt like the right distance in what we hoped was the

correct direction, a huge art car loomed out of the dust, its giant neon panels the only visible indication that it was there, and we worried that we'd gone off course.

This bus was a peculiar project in its own right: some group of artists had pooled their resources together over the previous year and bought a city bus. Then they had spent months equipping it with giant neon panels--like the LCDs on a digital watch, each panel could be configured to display any letter or number. Unlike a digital watch, each panel was brightly colored (red, blue, yellow and green) and over seven feet tall. For reasons that remain entirely opaque to me, the artists had then driven it all the way to Burning Man only to have it spell out bizarre pornographic messages, completely without context. The first night the LCD panels displayed "FACEFUCK" in letters seven feet high. Another night it spelled out "BALLS DEEP". This is all it did, and I never found out why. On this particular evening, the bus spelled out "BUKAKE?" That final question mark haunts me to this day.

At any rate, we were lost in the desert, able to see only a few feet in any direction and confronted by perplexing pornographic pronouncements. Things looked bleak, until the bus pulled away and revealed the Man, standing just behind. We quickly moved in and got a good seat, four or five rows from the outer ring of the Man. This ring was patrolled by brawny fellows in firefighters' jackets, because before long things were about to get very hot and then fall over. Burning Man prides itself on having very few rules indeed, but even still you are not allowed to immolate yourself in the Man.

There was a little bit of drama in our section of the crowd as we tried to convince a few folks to sit--some people seemed unable to grasp the notion that although their own view was improved by standing, a few hundred people behind them could no longer see anything. I hate those people. One fellow in particular remained obstinately upright regardless of our pleas until a stalwart fellow from Siberia stood up himself, facing the miscreant, to give him a taste. This Siberian was taller than his target by at least a foot and a half, and the man's view was now reduced to a few feet of Slavic chest. Rather well-muscled chest, I might add--after this he mumbled something and slunk off. I handed the Siberian hero the rest of my absinthe, which he seemed to appreciate.

By this point the wind had finally subsided, and it became clear that visibility would be damned near perfect throughout the rest of the evening. At some signal that I couldn't see, the Fire Conclave filed into the ring around the Man, fire burning in every imaginable way that fire can burn. Or, rather, the fire was burning the way fire always burns, but it was coming from devices of every imaginable construction. There were over twelve hundred dancers, so no one was actually able to see the majority of the performance. One friend of mine told me later that on her side of the Man the dancers were all in mermaid costumes, with endless plumes of fire jetting from the tips of their tails. Another friend said that from where he was sitting he got to see an enormous dragon puppet, made of fire and breathing fire, like an Indonesian shadow puppet (except ten feet high and burning). Because he was downwind, he also got to see what one gets when one mixes dust devils and massive amount of fire--swirling Fire Tornadoes that shot out towards the

audience at various points. I was a bit jealous of his vantage point, except for the fact that the dust and smoke also shot out towards them throughout. Also, Fire Tornadoes.

On our side the dancers used an astonishing array of implements, all of which were coated in flame. They used the traditional fire staff and fire poi, of course, but they also swung strands of burning rope in amazing patterns, and wielded honest-to-goodness flaming swords. There was at least one fellow with a burning candelabra attached to his head, and a whole line of women with claws made of flame. I remember seeing three men vaulting over a line of fire dancers to breathe out jets of flame in perfect unison.

After quite a while the dancers finished, and then there were a few minutes of breathless anticipation. Suddenly the base was lit by strobe lights, and fireworks exploded overhead. Somewhere in all of that the man had raised his arms to the sky, and as his legs caught fire he began to shoot even more fireworks out of his hands. A little while later the base itself exploded into flame.

Crimson Rose, who is essentially Burning Man's Art Director, had made a small joke here. Historically the base is lit first, and then it catches the Man on fire. After all, up through 1998 they were still lighting hay bales with matches, so that was the only possibility. This year, in defiance of expectations, the Man lit up first and then the base he was standing on. And I can guarantee that no matches were used.

The Man burned. It burned and it burned. Traditionally the crowd waits until the Man has finally had enough and topples over before ceremonially running around the inner ring like crazy people. This year, however (presumably because they were messing with things by lighting the platform secondarily) the Man simply would not fall. His head burned away, and one arm fell off, but the rest continued to stay overengineered and upright for a long time. Every so often a few last fireworks would shoot out, but after those stopped the firefighters decided that it was as safe as it would get and let us begin the tradition of running twice around the Man.

The first lap wasn't too hard, because there were a ton of people there who had never considered rushing him **at** the massive inferno of flame. After circling the remains once, however, things got a little dicey. The Tourists had screwed up their courage and taken a few steps forward to get better photographs. It still hadn't occurred to them that people were trying to run **around** the Man, so they assumed that we were all trying to get even better snapshots and took a few more steps forward. By the time I had returned again to my starting place, the remaining runners were getting pushed en masse rather disturbingly toward the flames by a crowd of angry photographers.

At that point some observant person said, "Look, weren't the legs a bit closer together a few minutes ago?" and we all looked and, sure enough, there had been a change to the still-burning remains. Everyone slowly backed up a few paces. Three minutes later, ever so gradually, the left leg tipped a little bit farther away, and then farther, and then with a

crash it pulled the rest of the sculpture to the ground. The Man had burned, and I stumbled out to find a drink somewhere.

The next day I went back to scrounge in the remains with the rest of the memento-seekers, and the whole area looked like the site of a tiny little war. Ash covered everything, and the embers were still far too hot to approach. A couple folks threw a fresh board into the middle of one ash pit, and before long there was a merry fire again--twelve hours had passed, and it was still impressively hot. However, the majority of the site had cooled off and I was able to find a few pieces of melted, twisted metal that had once been nails, and some glass that had shattered and then re-fused with itself. I also found a cool black thing that I think was molten sand, turned to rough glass by the heat of the fire. I plan to give that to Cat, although it doesn't look quite as cool as it sounds, I fear.

So what did it all mean? Well, the exact significance of the Man is one of the many mysteries of the Festival. This is a deliberate choice, to encourage everyone to develop their own interpretations. The first Man was a eight-foot-tall sculpture that Larry Harvey lit on fire one night on a San Francisco beach. It was originally intended as a one-off solstice ceremony (presumably riffing on the Wicker Man idea) but just as the Man caught fire, and just before it became a full inferno, Harvey saw a young woman climb up to it, gazing soulfully, and take it by the hand before fleeing to safety. This image was so startling to him that he decided that the image was more potent than he had realized, and resolved to explore it in greater depth.

One obvious interpretation is, of course, the Man--modern capitalist society, putting you down and suppressing you with its rule and its money and its materialism. The is certainly a good thing to burn down, no doubt. For me, however, the image is too triumphant for that, arms raised in victory even as the flames begin to spread. For me, the Man represents the Artist, subsumed in his own Creation, and the Burn represents the goal of the Artist. To devote yourself so completely to Truth and Beauty, to create an experience of the profound. If creating such an experience results in the sacrifice of your own life, in being consumed along with the rest, that is surely a small price to pay, and a cause for celebration. And of course it needn't be death by fire--Artists regularly sacrifice themselves in the pyres of poverty and isolation. The burning of the Man claims that, if you are willing to give enough of yourself, true beauty is possible.

The Temple

Other things burned as well, of course, and in concept I actually preferred the Temple to the Man. The Temple is another longstanding fixture of Burning Man, since David Best's Temple of the Mind in 2000. This year the Temple was called "Fire of Fires", and it was an enormous three-story structure with elaborately carved scroll work walls. It was not a theatre piece or a facade, it was a real building that could withstand tens of thousands of pilgrims climbing up and down its stairs all week long.

These pilgrims, myself included, walked the three-quarters of a mile or so across the desert in order to pay tribute to those we had lost, or those burdens we wished to lose. I won't go into detail about my own contributions, but I did write a short note to my dear cat Shelly on the wall in magic marker. There were hundreds and hundreds of such inscriptions, ranging from, "To my Mother, who died ten years ago. I will always remember you." all the way to "Bill, I forgive you". In addition, people had constructed elaborate shrines for their loved ones. I saw a brass sculpture containing a favorite CD, and on another wall someone had decorated and mounted a guitar, strings and all.

The building was massive, and every time I went I felt myself tearing up--it was undoubtedly the most emotion-laden spot that I have been for a very long time. By the end of the week almost every square inch had been covered in writing and mementos--one person had tacked a dollar bill to the wall, even. Someone else had put up an obituary in which, in lieu of a memorial service, the deceased asked "to be remembered in your own way". The Temple was utterly thronged by huge numbers of people at all hours of the day and night, and yet it somehow still managed to convey a peace and a solemnity that was quite moving.

The ceremony to burn it all to ashes was held on Sunday, following the burning of the Man, and it could not have been a more different experience. While the Man burning was a giant party and a celebration, the Temple burning was (in some cases literally) a dirge and a wake. It began as soon as there was silence, and to my astonishment this happened in a few short minutes. This one act impressed me as much as any pyrotechnical display or robotic dragon: take thirty thousand people who have spent a week partying their asses off in the desert, put them all in the same place at once, and get them to remain so quiet that I could hear someone sobbing from a quarter mile away.

Of course it wasn't an unbroken silence--one could feel that some folks were a little uncomfortable with the solemnity, and every so often someone would crack a joke, or yell for the hell of it, but for the first half hour or so these were by far the exceptions. Into this environment of quiet, the White Procession marched, a long line of folks wearing white robes and chanting, occasionally ringing quiet little bells. In the distance I could hear a women wailing, a ceremonial sound of mourning.

There was one gesture of typical Burning Man style flash, but even that managed to fit into the feeling perfectly: in the air, so high that I couldn't hear the noise from the airplane, six skydivers jumped out over the temple. Each one was trailing a long torch,

and as they spiraled down they looked like shooting stars. This part of the ceremony still brings tears to my eyes as I write about it, I confess.



The actual burn was very straightforward, with none of the buildup and showmanship of the Man. At some point (after, no doubt, thorough safety checks to ensure that the White Procession was well clear) the entire building simply caught fire, and each cutout symbol in the wall was clearly visible, back lit by the enormous fire inside.

(Photo by Don Bitters)

To my great dismay, in **practice** this burn worked less well for me than in theory. I had gotten in a rather heated altercation with a photographer, who thought that because he had a very fancy camera and a tripod, he should be allowed to block the view of everyone behind him. He eventually sat down, but I found myself unable to get over my rage at him. In addition, and occasionally almost drowning out the chanting, just about every person around me was busy snapping pictures with noisy little digital cameras. The continual noise just seemed so petty and so unnecessary--after all, the temple would look the same in every photo and, being digital, would certainly wind up online before long. But more to the point, for me this was a holy sacrament, the bastards were defiling it, and I couldn't relax and abandon those feelings. After half an hour or so, while the Temple was well and truly burning, folks began to shout at each other more and more, and I left early, feeling a bit low. This was the final day of Burning Man, so besides the sanctity of the ritual being threatened, I was also dealing with my forthcoming return to the "Default World". Not to mention the fact that I'd been drinking more than I'd been sleeping for about eight days at that point.

Fortunately, on my way back to my tent I ran into two strangers, who restored my faith in humanity. The first was another person sitting around the Temple, although farther back than I was. As I rushed out of the circle (a circle that must have been twenty rows deep, stretching all the way around the building) I accidentally stepped on this guy's hand. I immediately apologized, and he just smiled at me and said, "Hey, man, we're all in this together". Somehow it was comforting to know that even though I had been unable to put aside my petty feelings of irritation, there were other people who were more than able to do so. The other fellow I ran into was the guy running the bar at Dustfish, who saw me coming and gave me a huge smile (even though I had never seen him before) and started pouring me shots of whiskey with a root beer chaser. The liquor was good, and running into a friend that I had never met before was an even better way to end my time there.

Holy Crap! Shiny!

The Temple and the Man were the two big name tickets at Burning Man, obviously, and I put them into the category of "Pure Beauty". However they are both on the verge (the Man more so) of another of my private categories, "Shiny!". I think that this is an entirely valid type of art, and that a work that exists merely to say, "Holy Crap!" is a perfectly worthwhile piece of art. Keep in mind, of course, that I really like Jeff Koons.

Nevertheless, I felt that there were a bit too many of these pieces at Burning Man. Not because they weren't valid, but simply because each one diminished the others. When I arrived on Saturday, there were two or three converted tour buses that had been loaded with neon, and they just blew me away. A week later and there were so many of them that I literally could not see Black Rock City--not a single landmark was distinguishable from amidst the faceless sea of neon art cars.

The desert was full of pieces that, if on display in Chicago, would have a line around the block as the whole population came to view them. And yet, by comparison to the Man they merited only a casual, "neat!". No one could possibly build another Man, but a lot of people tried essentially to build him to half scale. While impressive, to be sure, this effort was largely doomed.

The folks who gave it their best shot, however, were undoubtedly the ones who built the Rocket Ship. The Raygun Gothic Rocket Ship was a forty-foot tall classic rocket made out of plate steel, and burnished to a beautiful shine under the desert sun. It had three floors, which were all accessible to the public via ladders (and a long, long line). There was a DJ booth on one floor, and an "Atomic Toaster" on another. It was fairly close to the Man in the center of the desert, and when the desert winds raised enough dust the perennial wit would observe that it had "finally blasted off".

They actually scheduled a lift off event for Friday night, and it really should have been a success. It began with a deafening air siren, that drowned everything out for a mile and made everyone wonder if the authorities were warning us of something (until we remembered that this was Burning Man, and we were our own authorities, and Larry Harvey, Crimson Rose, et al. wouldn't warn us about a damn thing). This was followed by Fourth of July caliber fireworks (although the show only lasted for three or four minutes, they were **very** well done and **very** large) and then a series of the most enormous explosions that I've ever seen. These fireballs went at least ten feet in the air, and who knows how far across. What's more, they had used some incredible science tricks to color the fire itself--it wasn't "fire red", it was "fire **engine** red", followed by an aquamarine blast, an emerald blast, and one that was bright yellow. All in all, it really should have been a satisfying spectacle.



(Photo by me)

However. First of all, there was another crazy white-out, and they had to postpone everything because the fireballs would literally have gone unnoticed. And then they continued to hold off, even after the dust subsided, for another two hours, until everyone who had been patiently waiting had decided that it would either be "The Second Coming" or "A Bullshit Letdown". But their real downfall was that in the Schedule, they had listed the event as "The Rocketship Lifts off!". I mean, we weren't dumb, and everyone knew that they weren't going to fly the thing to the moon or whatever, but this was Burning Man and if you claim that your rocket ship is going to "lift off" people expect that it will raise up into the air at least a few meters. Or, at the very least it seems possible that it *could* (remind me to tell you about the Daft Punk concert, sometime).

So by the time they were ready to fire off their big light show, the expectations had risen to "The Second Coming **and** a Flying Rocket Ship" or else "Bullshit Letdown Waste of Time" levels. The light show was incredible, but not incredible enough. They tried their hardest to do "Holy Crap! Shiny!" better than anyone else, and they didn't do a bad job. But it couldn't really compete with everything else.

Other people did cool stuff with interactivity **and** scale. There was a giant tree sculpture, bent in half so that it touched the ground at two points and somehow also representing dendrites in the brain. It was bright silver and covered in blinking lights--"Shiny!" if anything was. It was also, of course, on fire. It had twin spheres of fire, each one made by rotating flaming double rings around each other until persistence of vision took over. Finally, there were a series of pewter dials in the shape of brains, and a series of big, inviting buttons. Each dial controlled... something, and each button triggered... some event. But often the button would send a gout of flame shooting out of the opposite side of the piece, at a height determined by a dial four feet away, so it took a lot of experimentation to figure out how to work the Art. I liked that piece, but it never really went beyond "Holy Crap!".



(Photo by Don Bitters)

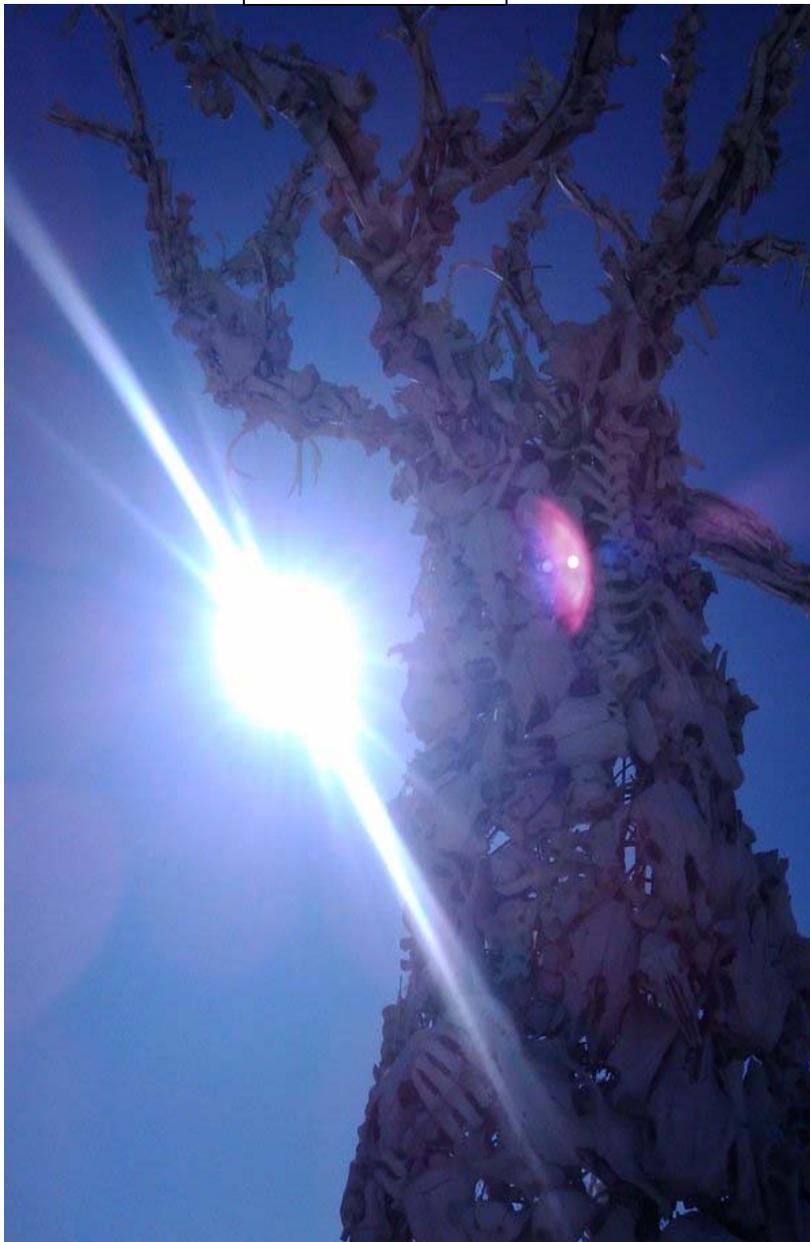
Finally, there were a bunch of variations on the large, elaborate, cool sculptures that also, of course, breathed fire. There was a giant bug-thing with mastodon horns and a row of flaming torches down its back. There was a metal viking longboat with an articulated dragon head (controlled by the driver) that drove around the desert. It also shot flames. There was a fifteen-foot-tall impressionistic sculpture of a woman, her hair streaming down and her hands lifted up, all made out of slightly rusted iron scraps. I didn't bother to see it myself, but I'm told that she could shoot fire out of her hands, as well.

Now I do not wish to malign the Iron Woman (perhaps the piece was really called "The Goddess", I'm not sure)--it truly was a magnificent sculpture. Even disregarding the fire (which I never actually saw) it's the kind of sculptural piece that even a city like Chicago would be proud to display out in front of the MCA. It would draw crowds in Chicago, and there are more than a few state

capitals for whom it might well become a fixture on license plates and stamps, if it had been displayed there. At Burning Man, however, it was worth a look in the daytime, but not necessarily the trip back out to see at night. It was just another shiny thing.

There was also a twelve-foot tall bronze giraffe that suffered much the same fate--it was hooked to a fuel line, so I can only assume that it was a fire-breathing giraffe after dark. I never went back to check, though. And then there was the enormous Tree Of Skulls, which is just what it sounds like and impressed me to no end on my very first day (before most everything else had been constructed yet). As near as I can tell, it's one gimmick was that it did **not** breathe fire. Actually, I managed to get a really awesome photograph of that piece, so I have a soft spot for it and might really classify it as "Pure Beauty" rather than merely "Ohh, Shiny!".

(Photo by me, actually)



Small and Clever

On the other end of the spectrum were the little pieces that, despite not having a flame cannon attached to them, were notable for their clever execution. In a way, I preferred these pieces to the fire-breathing giraffes because they had more to say than "Holy Crap!". One night as I was walking over to the Crazy Dance Camp side of the city (around 2 o'clock Street) at night in the middle of a gathering dust storm, I came across four metal poles, about seven feet off the ground, roofed by a wire mesh. Suspended from this mesh were seven or eight full business suites--the jackets connected to the mesh by wire, and the pants sewn onto the jackets. They were allowed to hang freely, and also to blow in the breeze.

In fact, they had been constructed such that any breeze would partially inflate them, adding a bit of weight to the empty suits, and would also cause them to flutter back and forth. As I came upon them, then, in the dim light of the evening and the dust storm they looked exactly like a group of mad salarymen all running away as quickly as possible. All running, and yet all remaining in exactly the same place. This is what I mean by small and clever art--for the price of a few second-hand suits and a metal structure, there was a haunting, visceral commentary on the rat race, ghostly forms forever running and never going anywhere.

My camp mate Osc (short for "Oscillator") had another small but effective piece in the middle of the desert. It was a little booth with a solar panel and a few rows of buttons, like a complicated arcade game. The buttons were colored green, yellow, blue and red, and there were no further instructions. Each button generated a pure note, which was then fed through a ping-pong echo effect, so that you could push a button and then hear the echoes left, then right, then left. Each color represented a set of notes in a particular scale, but the person playing with the device didn't need to know that. They just happened upon it and began hitting buttons, figuring out for themselves how to make music with it.



(Photo by Mikey himself)

On my way back from playing with Osc's device I happened across another art piece, Mikey's Hug Deli. This was a little shack with the day's specials on the outside wall, and 8x10 glossy endorsements on the inside, each one "signed" by a satisfied celebrity. Behind the counter stood Mikey, with an engaging smile and a bright orange apron. The specials ranged from "Warm and Fuzzy Hug", to "Long, Uncomfortable Hug", and the price was two compliments. I ordered a Bear Hug, and told Mikey that he had a very pretty apron and a great idea for a deli. It wasn't the best Bear Hug I'd received (Jason Eberhardt can lift me full off the ground, after all) but it was very nice indeed!

Another theme camp I went to had a couple tiny carnival rides set up. There was a zip line running across the front of the camp, and one person would climb onto a seat suspended from it while their friend took hold of a long rope and pulled them back and forth as quickly as possible--perhaps it was more fun than it sounds. They also had a swing set / merry-go-round, with four swings attached to arms from a central hub. On chair also had a set of bicycle pedals, allowing one of the riders to power to ride.

Pure Beauty

Then there were a bunch of other things that made me feel like I was in the most wonderful dream I'd ever had. The temple on fire certainly belongs in this section, as does the desert itself. Some of these things were art pieces created intentionally, like the five-foot diameter tree trunk that had been exquisitely carved into a glorious face. Others were simply experiences that I had, that I could never have had anywhere else.

The opening ceremony was like this, at least in part. Crimson Rose, stripped to her waist and with her long silver hair flowing down, used a concave mirror to focus the light of the sun onto a small stick, which she then used to light a brazier full of wood. This brazier contained the "eternal flame", which was kept burning all week long and eventually used to ignite the Man and the Temple. For a while, the dancing and the drumming and the light of the sun were intoxicatingly beautiful.

However, it also illustrated something that I saw again and again: the difference between Spectacle and Ritual. In Spectacle, the light of the sun would have ignited Crimson Rose's torch, which would then have triggered an explosion of flame in the wood (which would have been soaked in lighter fluid, of course) after a few seconds of dancing about. This was a Ritual, however, and all of the wood was untreated, and there were no additional elements in use to make the process any easier. This meant that for about half an hour she would light her stick, only to have the wind extinguish it before the brazier could be lit. She kept dancing, however, and the drummers kept drumming, and eventually it was successfully burning.

Thursday night was the night of the full moon, and I thought I'd head away from the bustle of the City; instead of heading inwards towards the Man I headed away from it. I biked down 8 o'clock Street, past Adapt Avenue and past Genome, all the way past Lineage, where the huge theme camps with rows of flaming torches gave way to little tents with glowsticks on the roof. I kept going out into the desert for a quarter mile, and then I dropped the bike and walked another quarter mile or so until I found myself at the trash fence. This is a three-foot-high fence of orange plastic mesh, designed to trap any debris that might fly out of town. It also represents the official border of Black Rock City.

Standing there, a half mile from the farthest outskirts of town was really wonderful--I felt entirely alone, and a little lonely, but it was tempered by the knowledge that I was only a few minutes away from the greatest party in the world. The moon was full that night, so only a few stars were visible, but the great expanse of the desert stretched out in the weird bluish light.

Contrast that with the experience of a few nights prior, in which I had spent the evening well and truly caught in the heart of the City. I hopped on an art car of some sort, which dropped me off by the Flame Thrower Shooting Gallery. I paused to watch four volunteers who were "neither drunk nor stupid--we determine the meaning of drunk and

stupid" receive instruction and then ignite their flamethrowers, sending a jet of fire twenty feet out.

I met up with eight Irish Lads and one Irish Lass from Cork, with names as Irish as I could hope for: Lorna, Mic, Kelly, Nigel, Decklin, Lionsy, Mark, and two others I'm afraid I've forgotten. Nigel kept insisting that I share his Mad Dog, and we all went to the Thunderdome. Straight out of Mad Max, the crowd chanted "Two Men Enter, One Man Leaves!" as two men inside the 'dome were strapped into giant bungee harnesses, and then given heavily padded sticks with which to beat the tar out of each other. Decklin and Nigel started chanting along in Irish, which sounded wonderful, but was too difficult for me to join in.

Separated from them after a while, I found myself on the top deck of another art car, with Nigel's Mad Dog still in hand. This one was a tour bus that had been outfitted with some sort of wooden framework, over which had been suspended layers of illuminated muslin. I'm not entirely sure what the end result was, perhaps something like the world's largest glowing seahorse.

I was taking in the sights, enjoying the techno music being pumped from the car's massive speakers and watching the girls dancing on the crow's nest (this art car had a crow's nest, an additional fifteen feet in the air above the top deck). All at once the girls descended, and the figure of Jesus Christ climbed up. I could tell that it was Jesus because he had the flowing locks, and the white robe with the red sash. In addition, he was carrying a large wooden cross with him. The crowd went wild, chanting his name, and he danced thirty feet over the desert floor, occasionally using his cross as an air guitar in time to the music. I know it wasn't all a dream because I don't think I've ever dreamed anything as outlandish or vibrant as that.