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Burning Man Culture Champing at the Bit

BY MITCH

There's nothing like a room full of media types to remind you why people sometimes do not love the press. Larry Harvey, the Burning Man co-founder and director, along with two lieutenants, was peppered with questions at the annual Black Rock City news conference on Wednesday that skewed toward the inane.

Some examples, followed by suggested responses from the peanut gallery in brackets: How much did the artwork cost? [How would they know? They fund a fraction of the projects and a fraction of the costs of those they finance.] Is Burning Man a retreat? I think it is a retreat. [Um, okay, sure.] How has the Internet changed Burning Man's marketing? [Great question for the 1997 news conference.] What is the biggest life lesson you have learned from Burning Man? [Wednesday is nothing like an orange.] How do we keep Burning Man from becoming too big and too corporate? [The better to eat you with, my dear.]

The Beacon's question was, we hope, a bit more pertinent: Has the weak global economy affected Burning Man?

Yes it has, Harvey said, but in a way you might not expect. Spending on Burning Man projects seems to be increasing as people look for alternatives to a financial system that seems to be breaking down. "We will

continue to grow even as Wal-Mart falters," he said.

Citing the economist Milton Friedman, Harvey said "Change only happens in a crisis." An obvious thesis if you think about it; during good times the status quo is good enough. Friedman's corollary: "When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around."

Harvey's view of the Bumer philosophy, encompassing the 10 Principles, is one of those ideas that is lying around. Principles such as community, decommodification, inclusion, and self-reliance become attractive alternatives if society disintegrates along the lines he envisions.

An Ecuadorian journalist, who spent some time thinking of a good question, asked Harvey what the most significant rite of passage in his life has been.

"I got pretty sick a couple of years ago," he replied. "I was confined to my bed for some time. I did not really tell anybody how sick I felt." Isolated and ailing, "I felt like a shade in Hades. A shadowy being."

Musing on mortality, he began to think of his legacy in terms of the future of Burning Man. He said he was focusing on ways to make the organization last for a long time, and that contributed to the decision to shift the ownership of Black Rock City to a not-for-profit organization.

The 2012 theme has not yet been decided, according to Marian Goodell, the Burning Man director of business and communications.

For the past few years, the Burning Man organization has announced the theme around the time the Man burned. It has not yet been selected and a decision is not imminent, Goodell said.

Signs of Doom

BY MITCH

Of the various stupid things you could do on the Playa, defacing or removing the street signs is pretty high up on the ass-down-o-meter. Yet it seems to be widespread this year, much to the consternation of Abby Ehrman, who manages the sign shop for the Department of Public Works.

"Those signs are there to save people's lives, not just to look good," she said. Black Rock City's grid was cre-

ated to make it easy for emergency vehicles to navigate in a hurry. One example is a replacement sign made out of fabric for the street officially known as Divorce. The new version, said Ehrman, dubbed it Decision, and the design made it hard to discern the initial "D". An ambulance driver looking for an address on Divorce might have to stop and get out to have a close look at the sign, wasting precious seconds in an emergency. This is exacerbated when the replacement sign does not match the initial letter of the original.

Even worse than replacement is the outright removal of a sign, a frequent Burning Man phenomenon, as people take them as souvenirs. (We know of one really weird person who has a house wallpapered with Black Rock City streets of the past.) Burners are encouraged to replace street signs that have been removed or damaged, and that tradition may be combining with the disdain some citizens feel for the annual names given to the streets. Few Black Rock citizens actually use full street names when giving addresses, which function perfectly well with just the initial letter. It may seem trivial, then, to christen



photo by Taymar

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a street with a new name, especially when the first letter matches the original.

There is no prohibition against adding signs below the official street identifiers. Scott and Patrick of Transit Lounge have been putting up signs on the streets around their camp, mainly along 4:00. "Ours are more legible," said Patrick, who added that they are posting signs with the right initial letters and not removing the official ones. The idea was to have so many signs with the correct letter that even after some theft there would be enough left to

FLOATING IS LAND

BY DURGY

Is Land takes a two-dimensional landscape, puts it into 3-D, lights it up and floats it with helium. It represents other regimes, alternate realities and parallels.

The Beacon sat down with Sarah Cookings and Laurence Symonds to hear about their floating vision drifting away only to return as a new incarnation on the Playa.

The artists of Is Land wanted to bring their conception of an escapist realm to a place where time and schedule hardly matter - in Black Rock City. A little over a month ago, they did a test run at the Secret Garden Party festival in England. Held in place by five tethers, the piece floated above a lake. Toward the close of that festival, three men rowed out to the piece and



photo by Durgy

cut the tethers. The Is Land piece then headed toward the stratosphere.

The artists contacted Cameron Balloon Co. to conduct a meteorological trajectory in hopes of recovering their piece. Based on atmospheric

conditions at the time of the liberation of Is Land, they estimated that it would travel in a north easterly direction towards Germany and the Czech Republic. The Is Land crew also contacted newspapers and radio stations. Many sightings were reported from Swansea to Poland. To date, Is Land has not been recovered.

Within a month before BRC, the Is Land artists began reconstructing their piece. Funded by the Burning Man organization, the Secret Garden Party, some donations, and by the artists, a new incarnation of Is Land was completed in time for it to move throughout the Playa.

Is Land currently floats at Esplanade and 6:10 near the Artery.

Some Sites to See in Black Rock City

BY MRS. LUCKY

Looking for something beyond the obvious? Here are some sites to see slightly off the beaten path in Black Rock City.

East City: They do a brisk business in the hours before the Billion Bunny March. Camp Bunny Side is on 4:00 between Birthday and Coming Out. "You want to be bunny-f ded?" asks Rachel, a second-year Bumer from New York. "You have to go through the rabbit hole first." Those that pass through are gifted with ears, tail, and bunny juice.

A five-hump ramp makes the camp of Black Rock Bike Course worthy of a visit. It is on the East side of Birth-

day just a few spots south of 3:30. The group from Reno and Tahoe has been camping together for 10 years. Staaby says this is the first year they've come up with a "wow" idea. For more bike fun, try the teeter totters and such on the Playa 2:45 off the Esplanade.

West City: Party in the sky at Panda Lounge, at the northwest corner of 9:30 and Birthday. 12.5 feet in the air, the deck shimmies to the DJs beat. Caution on the steep flight down after cocktails! "I've never built anything like this before," said designer and builder Cleveland. "We think we are pretty high."

Five little houses fronted with fake grass are found on Engagement at 7:45. Gnome scale and identical except for door color; they look so darn cozy. But restrain yourself! A sign pleads, "please do not have sex in the little houses, we live here." In small print they add, "unless of course you are having sex with us."

Center City: Since 1998, Sake Noma has been the place to get cold, fine rice wine, this year on the west side of 5:30 between Coming Out and Divorce. Camp leader Sirloin is serious



photo by Harrod Blank

Allen Christian sculpture behind some dude in the foreground.

about sake. His gang pours 600 to 1,000 servings of very good G injo grade. For the best grades they shave off the outer kernel of the grain, eliminating the part that'll give you a hangover.

Before mutant vehicles, there were art cars. Art Car Camp, on the northwest corner of 5:30 and Anniversary, is one of the first theme camps. See Harrod Blank's VW Bug "Oh My Gwad," the second art car at Burning Man. Check out Allen Christian's slightly twisted silverware creations. You'll be afraid to sit down to dinner.



Guess which one is real?

figure out where you were.

The duo set a goal of creating names related to the Rites of Passage theme, never producing more than one duplicate. They are supposed to be funny, and at least some of them are. Examples include Birth, Boner, Barbie, Enema, Erection, Cunnilingus, Cherry, First Base.

Then there was Double Rainbow. Scott and Patrick hung two versions of that at 4:00 and D, not far from a place you might call Angry Camp. Predictably, Burners in various states of sobriety started shouting "What does it mean?" aping the stream of consciousness babble from a viral 2010 YouTube video.

Angry Camp's patience was limited, and they replaced the signs with Double Penetration and Double Donger. When the pair returned with new Double Rainbow signs to replace those replacements, "they chased us away with an axe," said Patrick.



photo by Taymar

Two of the 22 projects in the Circle of Regional Effigies aflame last night. Expect to see the concept return.

