

visual art

It's hot stuff: how Burning Man became the ultimate creative dare

A new documentary on the legendary Nevada festival depicts an artists' paradise where anything goes, says Rachel Campbell-Johnston

Get ready to dance naked round your laptop. Check that it's safe to burn that effigy in your backyard. You should have made a start on the fancy-dress costume. You could parade it on Facebook. But will it be quite the same to take part in an orgy — sorry, "a consensual non-monogamy workshop" — over Zoom?

Burning Man moved, in 1990, to the vast empty spaces of the Black Rock Desert. And it grew...and grew...and grew. In the year that Fox filmed, more than 80,000 people from across the planet pitched up. For a few weeks every year a temporary metropolis — Black Rock City — is constructed with graph-paper precision somewhere (never precisely the same spot) in the middle of what is probably the largest expanse of nothing in the northern hemisphere. It is governed by ten fundamental principles, with radical inclusion, self-reliance, self-expression and communal effort among them. Apart from that, anything goes.

Burners pedal about on bicycles in peculiar costumes, singing and dancing and whooping and waving fire sticks. They build human pyramids, argue counterfactual definiteness with shamen, connect with their chakras, transcend their egos and get plastered head to toe in the ubiquitous dust.

"Its beauty is the randomness," says Jennifer Raiser, the author of *Burning Man: Art on Fire*, which preceded the film. "You go out in the morning and you have no idea what you are going to encounter: a flaming tuba, a march of people dressed up as bunnies, a single flautist playing at sunset. The magic... is the wonder and beauty and unpredictability." Here is a "multiverse" that can offer a "global quantum kaleidoscope of possibility" — and yes, that includes the free sex that gets outsiders boggling, but which old-timers insist is far from the big thing.

The big thing about this festival (although actually you aren't supposed to call it a festival; it's a community) is the art. That's what makes it unique. "For one week in August the playa becomes the largest art gallery in the world," says Raiser. It was certainly the art that caught the attention of Fox. "Sure, I have always been interested in Burning Man as a phenomenon," he tells me. "Who wouldn't be intrigued by all those stories of orgy domes and wild dancing? But it's the art that underpins everything, that makes this gathering feel so different from all the thousands of other festivals that take place every summer."

Last year there were 400 pieces of art on display. These might involve you in anything from a ride on a utopian carousel to pushing about a massive polar bear. "Sometimes it's just funny. It just sort of bubbles over and makes you giggle," one interviewee says as, turning, he spots a giant bumblebee trundling by.

"At a minimum," says the artist Kate Raudenbush — who has been visiting this "magical desert" for more than 20 years —

preparation, of community effort, of human blood, sweat and tears that it represented) roared heavenwards in a blaze of fire. "It felt to me," Fox says, "to be on the very furthestmost bounds of what was acceptable."

Not for old-timer Raudenbush, however. "Burning the art is almost like a spiritual process," she says. "Because you know you have to let it go... it becomes an act of devotion and not attachment... You are making art as an offering to your community, to exist in the present moment only. It's the experience that they are going to remember. It's the connection that they are going to remember."

Not everything is burnt. The festival is run on strict environmental principles. Burners must leave no trace — at least not in the desert. The rubbish bins of the nearest towns, apparently, are left overflowing in its wake. There is a special burning committee. You can't torch your artwork just because you have got fed up with dragging it around. You must prove that immolation is integral to its aesthetic intention.

In 2018 the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum staged a touring show of Burning Man art. The pieces may be too diverse to be easily banded into a movement, yet their interactive nature is certainly starting to feel more familiar. Its aesthetic is becoming increasingly influential, suggests Atkinson, who curated the Smithsonian show.

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three quarters of an inch. The terrible crack that you hear when its two halves are finally brought together, one hoisted by crane on top of the other, makes you cover your eyes.

"My modus operandi is, how can I blow people's minds?" says Raudenbush, whose 2018 contribution is a homage to the festival's founder. It consists of a series of decorative door frames, the last of which frames Harvey's stetson-hatted silhouette. "How can I make people feel happy, how can I make them feel included, how can I elevate them, make them laugh, give them a sense of wonder and amazement?" Raudenbush wonders.

She must also make the most precise calculations to ensure that, on the day of the solstice, her portals line up exactly with the rising sun. They do, and even for me, watching the documentary on my laptop and never even having met the man to whom this piece pays homage, it was an emotional moment when that sun rose and came streaming in.

It is at night, however, that most of the art comes alive. The flat, sun-bleached desert landscapes turn, with the arrival of darkness, into a fairground of blinking lights and exploding fireworks, flickering bonfires and sweeping lasers: "a mass of lights and fire", of "human creativity going on into the distance in every direction", as Nora Atkinson, the organiser of a touring exhibition of Burning Man art, describes it. "It was like walking into a Ridley Scott futuristic vision," Fox says. "You would never get an experience like that in the normal art world. You would never find a giant octopus waving about under the stars. And I tried my best to capture an onerific sense of its dreamlike quality."

He tried also, he says, to capture a sense of its spiritual atmosphere. "There is a very strong sense of some spiritual presence. And that, again, amazed me. I don't know how great this art would be outside the context of Burning Man, but my God, when you are there... I felt very emotional," he says.

Not as emotional as when the festival came to its finale and the entire temple (and the hundreds of hours of design and



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"you are required to bring everything with you to survive for a week in a harsh environment where nothing is for sale and there is no wifi. That is the baseline participation. Beyond that, Burning Man is the ultimate creative dare. It is a blank canvas of a city."

For one week a year, she explains, "it rises to become one of the most mind-boggling, liberating and absurdly creative places on Earth" before disappearing again, without trace, into the ground. And the "first thing this environment forces you to do is create big, strong art... because it's so vast you just have to fill it."

"You could have 2,000 pieces of art here and there would still be room and it would still look amazing," Raiser says. It's not just the size that counts, she insists. "When artists come to Black Rock they are finally able to be in a place where they can express whatever they want." They can quite liter-

ally fulfil their dreams, she explains, citing the story of a regular contributor who once scribbled down a picture of what he had seen in his sleep and a few weeks later was building it.

The only constraints are technical ones. Artworks must be able to withstand punishing weather, winds of 80mph, dramatic changes in temperature, endless dust storms, not to mention countless people climbing on them. "There's no velvet rope at Burning Man," Raiser says with a laugh.

And what about the money it costs to make work on this scale? How do they manage in a non-commercialised, cashless community in which nothing can be bought or sold except coffee and ice? There is a Burning Man committee, apparently, to which creative proposals are submitted. It will part-fund (up to half the expense) about a quarter of the art pieces. The rest of the makers must resort to

crowdfunding campaigns and rich patrons. Luckily, there are plenty of those. It has been at least a decade since the Silicon Valley tech moguls started to look in, touching down in their private jets to pitch (air-conditioned) camp. Supermodels, Hollywood celebrities and wealthy entrepreneurs followed suit.

At the heart of the massive ephemeral city that, together, they construct, stands a temple. Think of the Serpentine pavilion in London, then scale it massively up. This, with the so-called man base — the complicated structure on which the towering sacrificial effigy of a human being is set — is the focus of Burning Man.

It is the creative process of building these structures that Fox's documentary follows, along with that of a handful of the sculptures that will be displayed near by: a giant glass jellyfish, a vast hermaphroditic figure made of recycled metal,



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BAPTISM OF FIRE From top: partway through Matt Schultz and crew's construction of Head Maze at last year's gathering, and the Man burning in 2015. Below: a performer in the desert, a scene from Gerry Fox's film

portals that will channel the path of the rising sun's rays.

The creation of a sculpture for this setting is "a baptism by fire of iconoclastic dimensions", Raudenbush says. In the documentary the architect Arthur Mamou-Mani, whose *Gulzar* — a great volcano-shaped latticework of wood — is about to be erected as the central temple, appears to be in no doubt as to the immensity of the task. "I'm going to be in debt. I'm not going to sleep. I'm going to be working six months nonstop. I will risk everything: my friendships, my relationships," he acknowledges. And this took him, not unnaturally, "a while to accept".

One of the defining features of Burning Man is that, as Raudenbush puts it, "there are no spectators". To be there is to participate. Mamou-Mani says that the 18 days of building what effectively amounted to a colossal matchstick model temple in the desert dramatically altered his outlook on life.

This is a documentary to watch with bated breath. Mamou-Mani's temple — an amalgam of traditional carpentry and computer algorithms — is the most complicated structure he has worked on. Yet it is raised by amateur volunteers. They must get it right to within

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LARGER THAN LIFE An artwork featured in the documentary. Above right: El Pulpo Mecanico by Duane Flatmo (2014)