

THIS IS BURNING MAN

*THE RISE OF A
NEW AMERICAN UNDERGROUND*

BRIAN DOHERTY



Little, Brown and Company

New York Boston

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Prologue: Welcome to Black Rock City</i>	1
<i>Part One: Ignition</i>	
1 “A Spontaneous Act of Radical Self-Expression”	19
2 “You May Already Be a Member!”	32
3 “It Felt Like Glory”	50
<i>Part Two: Radical Self-Reliance</i>	
4 “It Ain’t Ever Happening Again”	83
5 The Fall of the Temple of the Three Guys	109
6 “Of Course It’s All Right to Shoot Papa Satan!”	131
<i>Part Three: No Spectators</i>	
7 The World’s Most Dangerous Drink Blender	153
8 “The Ass Has Spoken!”	176
9 “This Isn’t What the Real World Is Like”	198
<i>Part Four: Anarchy and Community</i>	
10 “You Can Burn Your Own Car”	223
11 Leave No Trace	245
12 “Beyond the Valley of the Groovy”	261
<i>Epilogue: We All Did the Right Thing</i>	277
Acknowledgments	289
Index	293
About the Author	305

WELCOME TO BLACK ROCK CITY

It's the strangest thing. I've wiped the dashboard of my '87 Subaru almost a dozen times now, and the white powder filling all its crannies just won't go away. When it's wet, it looks clean, for a minute. But when it dries, the coating is still there.

It wouldn't matter if I got it out of my car anyway. That dust — the residue of the Black Rock Playa, in Nevada — is inside me now. And it's never going away.



Many great faiths have been born in visions arising from the desert. And no desert has ever seen a vision more inspiring of faith than the annual gathering called Burning Man. “Burning Man,” wrote journalist Daniel Pinchbeck, with admirable precision, in *Breaking Open the Head*, “is more decadent than Warhol’s Factory, more glamorous than Berlin in the 1920s, more ludicrous than the most lavish Busby Berkeley musical, more of a love-fest than Pepperland, more anarchic than Groucho Marx’s Freedonia, more implausible than any mirage.”

Every year, increasing numbers of pilgrims — more than thirty thousand in 2003 — drive down a long two-lane highway, heading about one hundred miles northeast of Reno, Nevada. Their destination is the widest stretch of utter desolation in the continental United States, nearly four hundred square miles of desiccated lake bed. There’s no water, no plumbing, no shade, no life — nothing but packed-down alkali dust cracking off to every horizon.

The temperature at this terribly inhospitable wasteland — the Black Rock Playa — can, and probably will, stay well above 100 degrees all day. At night it may well plummet to near freezing. It is frequently

beset by unpredictable and brutal windstorms during which the dust rises and coats and blinds you and whatever shelter you've built will very likely be dashed to the ground.

So many people will be there, crammed into such a small space, that the desolation beyond the encampment will seem a cruel tease as the inhabitants live for a week in an impromptu tent city that screams "refugee camp" more than it does "vacation."

Still, almost all of them are more than just resigned to a week condemned to this unpleasant-sounding fate. They are ecstatic. They are at Burning Man.



Burning Man started in 1986 as a little ritual for a couple of buddies and a handful of their friends on a beach in San Francisco — the simple burning of a simple wooden man, for no reason they will specify. They decided to keep doing it every year, and slowly, by accident, this act attracted more and more people, who became dedicated not so much to the burning of a blank icon as to the things that started happening around the fire.

At first it was nothing more than a reason for some friends to gather. Now, a fully functional city — Black Rock City — appears and then quickly disappears around the ritual. This temporary city is complete with a local constabulary, a mainstream daily and an alt-weekly, more than a dozen radio stations, a power grid, thirty-eight miles of roads, and more artistic expressions in more media per square inch than anywhere else on Earth. Journalist Fiona Essa once aptly described the scene as akin to "a war zone where the explosions had left art in their wake."

Every year on the Saturday before Labor Day, in America's most beautifully forbidding and awesomely empty landscape, a forty-foot statue adorned with lovely neon lighting gets burned. But the burning of the statue is just the MacGuffin, the thing around which the real story gets set in motion, not the theme. The real story is what happens to people — what they do, what it means to them, how it changes them — when they can make a temporary society qualitatively different in many respects from their everyday one. It's a civi-

lization that by the mutual agreement of all attendees has almost no commerce and is dedicated purely to creativity and play, where the standards of normal life can be inverted or ignored in the pursuit of fresh experiences and fresh identities.

People do work at Burning Man — and work remarkably hard — on building ephemeral things for the joy of creation, for the fulfillment of working with others to pull off the grand gesture, for status and bragging rights in their transitory community, pursuing a preindividualist vision of the good life, which at Burning Man is found only in working with and contributing to the polis.

The experience provides so much more than any one person can see, do, or be. Burning Man is not an event or a happening or a theme park or an arts festival, though it has aspects of all those. It is, truly, a city. Black Rock City began as somewhat of a wry gag on the part of the tight-knit group of Bay Area artists and cultural rebels who started it. But it has grown way beyond their control, or anyone's. A true city arises, develops, evolves, catches fire, then disappears, built on a backdrop of nothing, imbuing it with a rich metaphorical resonance and also summoning an extraordinary and ever-shifting visual panorama as the city is constantly either growing or dissolving.

The story of how a handful of people burning a statue on a beach became, in only fifteen years, a temporary civilization of tens of thousands is one of the stories this book tells. While it is a long story, in its way, it is not ultimately very complicated: It happened because people wanted it to happen, people made it happen, and no one stopped them. No one planned for it, ordered it into existence, bought it, or paid for it. It was a spontaneous flowering of a felt need of a free people.



The experience of Burning Man is unique. Aspects of it do resemble older traditions or other gatherings of intentional community. Assembling to burn an effigy reminds one of ancient myths of Celtic sacrifice like the Wicker Man (and the cult movie of the same name based on it), and also of Zozobra, when the Kiwanis in Santa Fe, New Mexico, burn a giant firework-laden effigy in a city park and



A burning man walks up the steps to ignite the Man, 1997. © *A. Leo Nash*



The Burning Man, 1997. © *A. Leo Nash*



Dr. Megavolt, 1999. © *A. Leo Nash*



Jenne Giles and Paul Cesewski's Lotus Land, 2002.

© Scott Harding

Rosanna Scimeca's Cleavage in Space, 2003.

© 2003 by Gene X. Huang/Orange Photography

