



Radical Self-Expression The Costumes of Burning Man

At Nevada's annual festival, clothing becomes a vehicle for truth-telling and transformation. *by Linda Gass*

Every year, for a week around Labor Day (in September), a temporary city springs up in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. Like a classic mirage, a vibrant metropolis appears out of the nothingness of the flat, ancient dry lakebed to become the third largest city in Nevada, and then it vanishes again. It's the site of Burning Man, a weeklong communal camping event. In 2007 more than 47,000 people attended.

The desert environment is harsh. Most of my friends and family think I'm crazy to spend a week camping in the 100-degree heat, buffeted by dust storms with wind gusts up to 60 mph.



To me, it's worth it. I have gone seven times so far. My personal experiences at Burning Man have had a profound effect on my art making and costume design as well as enduring effects on other aspects of my life. Many Burning Man participants experience some sort of transformation, and part of what enables this transfor-

ABOVE: Participants watch the burning of The Man, Burning Man 2007. LEFT: The author in her Jellyfish Costume at Burning Man 2002. Skirt: iridescent polyester organza, glitter-dot fabric, silk. Bra decorated with sequins, pearls, rhinestones. Photo: Jim Feuhrer. All other photos by the author.

mation is wearing costumes and doing so in a community in which so many others are engaged in a similar activity.

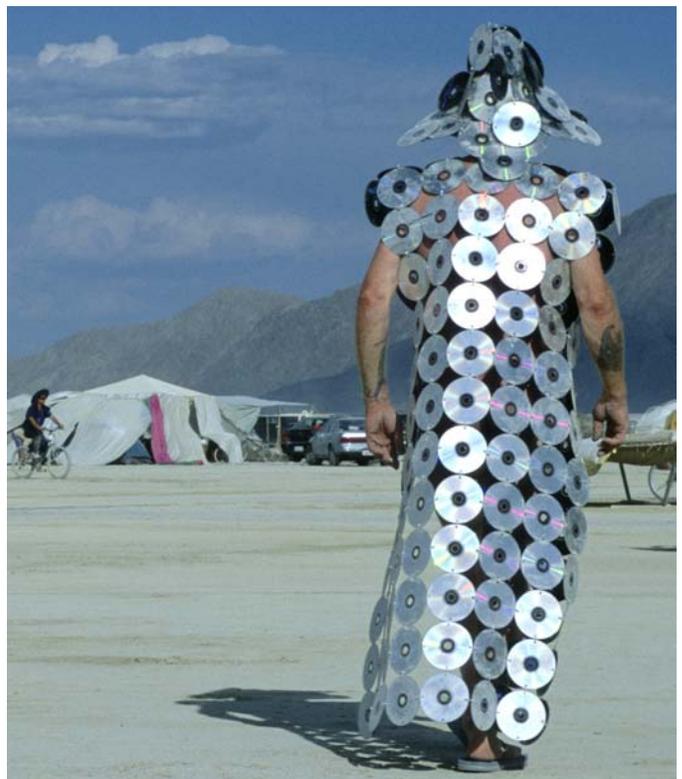
The Desert Scene

Burning Man began in 1986, in the cool fog of Baker Beach in San Francisco, when Larry Harvey and some friends built an 8-foot-high wooden man and burned him on the beach. People spontaneously joined them and they had such a good time that it became an annual ritual, roughly doubling in size each year. By 1990 the event had become too big for the beach, and they moved it to the Nevada desert. The centerpiece and focus of the event continues to be “The Man,” now a 40-foot-high wooden effigy. The weeklong event culminates in burning The Man on the Saturday night of Labor Day weekend in a wild, primal ceremony with fire dancers and drummers and an extravagant fireworks display.

All attendees must be “radically self-reliant” and bring everything they will need to survive for the week: water for drinking, showers, cooking, and cleaning; food; shelter; clothing (including costumes!); and comfort items. There are no services available other than porta-potties, and you cannot purchase anything other than ice (for your cooler) and coffee and tea drinks. The event operates on a gift economy, in which no money changes hands and bartering is discouraged; instead, a utopia of gifting others is the norm. People organize “theme camps” where they camp together and offer interactive services or entertainment such as yoga classes, pancake breakfasts, body painting, or 24/7 techno music—all for free. Camps range in size from a few people to more than 200. People often adopt pseudonyms for the event—some that reflect a desired persona, and others that are just fun and silly.

The city is filled with ambitious and profound art installations. The Man isn’t the only thing that burns: Many artists build their artwork from wood and burn it during the week, and there are large metal fire sculptures fueled by propane. It’s forbidden to drive an undecorated vehicle around Burning Man, but those who create special art cars can be licensed by the DMV (Department of Mutant Vehicles). Some of these vehicles blur the boundary between art car and costume, for example, the *Bunny Slippers* by Lisa Pongrace and Greg Solberg [see page 36]. A pair of specially-built electric scooters 7½ feet long have been covered in cotton-candy-pink fur rugs. Pongrace made giant yarn pom-poms for the noses and giant “button” eyes from Tupperware lids painted black. Ironically, she says it’s hard to get anywhere when she’s driving a *Bunny Slipper* because she can’t get more than 10 feet without being stopped by someone. People instantly love them—they will actually hug the bunnies.

TOP: Waterboy, Burning Man 2001. **BOTTOM:** Coat and hat made from CDs by Martini Man (Jim Feuhrer), Burning Man 2003.





ABOVE: Lisa Pongrace with Bunny Slippers electric scooters made by her and Greg Solberg, Burning Man 2007.

Although the event is a giant spectacle in every dimension, everyone is encouraged to be a participant, not a spectator. One of the basic principles of the event is “radical self-expression,” and this is considered a fundamental way to participate and share one’s gifts with the community at large. There is something about Burning Man that makes everyone look so beautiful—I’m not talking about a superficial physical beauty but a deep inner beauty that radiates to the surface because people are able to be who they really want to be. It’s a form of transcendence that many can’t find anywhere else in our everyday existence.

A Culture of Costume

From the moment you arrive at Burning Man, you notice that people are dressed differently. You’ll see everything ranging from thrift-store finds put together in unusual and creative combinations to elaborate and imaginative handmade costumes. Burning Man costumes are different from other costumes you might see on Halloween or at Mardi Gras or as part of a theater performance. In fact, I wish there was a word other than

costume to describe these works of art, as often this word implies dressing as something you are not, yet many of the people in costume at Burning Man are dressing in way they wish they could dress all the time.

What people wear ranges from the practical and comfortable to costumes that are nearly impossible to move in. In the practical category are fashionable forms of dust protection, such as outlandish goggles and interesting bandanas and dust masks, useful survival items for the frequent and unpredictable dust storms.

The irresistible desire to play with fire finds its way into costumes, both symbolically with flame-print fabrics and actually with real flames in metal hats with propane driven flames coming out of the top. A fast-growing category is electronic art costumes. It’s where geek meets chic in elaborate nighttime costumes using battery-powered LEDs and electroluminescent (EL) wire. With light sources attached to black bodysuits and using pro-



ABOVE: Ray Dance the Giant Sun (Giant Puppet), Burning Man 2007. Created by Coyote Rising, the Oregon-based community puppet clan, which specializes in performing spontaneous acts of lunacy. Built on an aluminum frame with soft fabric, the puppet is 20' high and has a 26' arm span.

grammed animations, they transform the appearance of the human form into new fantastical forms in the nighttime darkness.

Sometimes humor plays an important role in costumes. One example is the impromptu brigades of people dressed as French maids that sweep through people's camps with feather dusters in a Sisyphean attempt to keep the desert environment dust-free.

Each year Burning Man has a new theme to create a focus for the art. This year's theme was "The Green Man," intended to explore humanity's relationship to nature. Costumes relating to this theme ranged from people wearing the color green to elaborate nature-inspired creations to wearables made from recycled materials such as rubber bicycle and motorcycle inner tubes.

Costume Theme Camps

Underscoring the appeal of wearing costumes at Burning Man are whole theme camps devoted to gifting costumes to the community. Costume Kult started as a small group of people from New York with the idea of giving away costumes that were being retired by local costume-rental shops. The camp has now grown to more than 100 people, and this year they brought more than 1,700 pounds of costumes to give away. Another theme camp is the Black Rock Boutique, with racks and racks of free clothing. The camp even offers fashion consultations to help people tap into and express their subconscious desires, fantasies, or visions of themselves. This group from Portland, Oregon, works hard all year to secure hip clothing before it's donated to other places.

Josie Schimke camps with a theme camp called Panty Camp. They give away an average of 100 pairs of panties a day at Burning Man. Panty Camp started with the whimsical idea to build an entire camp made of panties. In order to supply their panty habit, the campmates have developed relationships with thrift



stores, which save panties for them all year and they campaign for donations of panties from individuals. The camp features imaginative panty costumes and the Panty Pavilion, a walk-in tentlike structure covered entirely in panties. One of Schimke's favorite costumes is her *Panty Hoop Skirt*, a four-tiered construction supported with plastic tubing. Designed as a themed costume for the 2001 theme "The 7 Ages of Man," Josie's hoop skirt has four "ages" progressing from children's panties to teen bikinis to women's briefs to high-rise granny panties. She even used pieced-together panties to make the bloomers that she wears underneath.

Ritual and Performance

One of the striking things about the costumes at Burning Man is that they become an additional way for people to communicate with and interact with one another. It was hard not to notice Jay Pretula this year, covered in stuffed teddy bears and Beanie Babies. The coat definitely changes Pretula's interactions with people: it's customary to ask a stranger before you

ABOVE LEFT: Josie Schimke in her Panty Hoop Skirt, at Burning Man 2007. Each tier represents a different age group of panty wearers: child, teen, adult, and granny. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Jay Pretula in his Cloak of Many Bears, Burning Man 2007.

give them a hug; however, when Pretula is wearing his coat, people spontaneously hug him without asking. I observed a four-year-old girl run up to Jay, hug him, and say, "You're like Santa!"

Some costumes fall into the category of performance art. These costumes enable rituals and artistic performances. *Waterboy* [page 35] is a transparent water-filled bag in the shape of a human suspended from a metal frame. Artist Marque Cornblatt enters the bag with scuba gear and engages passersby in mock-religious leader fashion by preaching to them to "embrace the moisture" in this desiccating environment.

Sometimes the performance-art aspects of a costume happen in stages. The first thing I noticed about Syn (Melissa Barron) was her beautiful mane of rainbow-colored hair extensions, intricately braided with yarns, beads, and charms. She told me



ABOVE: Syn (Melissa Barron)'s Crowning Glory, Burning Man 2007. LEFT: She began the week in rainbow-colored hair extensions with yarn, beads, and charms. RIGHT: With her hair extensions cut off and her head shaved and painted, she donned a cape of donated hair (sewn by Gail Shrive).

this adornment was part of an art project titled *Crowning Glory*. Three years ago, Syn attended Burning Man while she was in the middle of chemotherapy for breast cancer. She had lost a breast and all of her hair, and wasn't sure what her female identity was any longer, especially in the midst of Burning Man's highly sexually charged environment. Her own reactions and those of others to her bald head and her new hair prompted her to create an art project to demonstrate that we are not our hair or any other external influence; rather, we are our inner wisdom, love, strength, integrity, and compassion. After putting out a call for donations of cuts or locks of hair, she enlisted the help of her friend Gail Shrive, and together they designed a cape with pockets for short hair and places to attach the longer pieces. Syn arrived at Burning Man this year adorned with her

lovely hair extensions and her cape. In the early evening on the last day of the event, she engaged others in a ritual to transform her head back to being bald. She invited those present to cut off her hair extensions and then had her head shaved. A friend painted a beautiful and fierce warrior design on her scalp to symbolize her inner qualities, and then she put on her cape of hair and walked into the sunset.

At the end of a the week, all of these beautiful visions disappear. Everything is packed into vehicles and driven away. The only evidence that remains are footprints and tire tracks, and even these will be erased with the winter rains. The experience lives on, however, in all who were there, and if we're lucky, it reemerges as creative inspiration. FA

The Burning Man website is www.burningman.com. Dates for 2008 are August 25–September 1; the theme is American Dream. Websites for projects mentioned in the article are www.crowningglory.com, www.kostumekult.com, www.blackrockboutique.com, and www.pantycamp.net. For more about the costumes and culture of Burning Man, visit Geoffrey Nelson's website, www.tribeofartists.com.