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ART & DESIGN

Will the Spirit of Burning Man Art Survive in Museums?

By BRIAN SCHAEFER MARCH 23, 2018

WASHINGTON — At the end of the summer, for one week only, hundreds of giant fantastical sculptures and whimsical roving vehicles appear, then disappear like a shimmering mirage in the Nevada desert. We're talking about Burning Man, the notoriously free-spirited annual spectacle that has occupied a dry lake bed outside Reno for nearly 30 years.

Depictions of Burning Man tend to focus on the hedonistic antics of attendees, but from the beginning, when its co-founder, Larry Harvey, burned a wooden effigy as a summer solstice ritual on a San Francisco beach in 1986, art has been part of its DNA, and increasingly the museum world is taking notice. When Burning Man started selling tickets in the mid-1990s, it began giving away artist grants. That support, now totaling around $1.3 million annually, plus quiet funding from Silicon Valley, has allowed Burning Man's art projects to grow in ambition and quality.

A generation of volunteers spawned more artists, turning Burning Man into "an informal but very effective art school," as Mr. Harvey put it. Pointing to these apprentices and what he called "enlightened patronage," he sees parallels in the blossoming of art at Burning Man and the Italian Renaissance, its art theme in 2016.

It's a leap — but the Hermitage Museum and Gardens in Norfolk, Va., hosted an exhibition of Burning Man art last summer, and on March 30, "No Spectators: The Art of Burning Man" invites the radical art of the desert into the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, steps from the White House, for its first major national showcase. Both are making a case that this large scale, largely crowd-funded, collaborative and ideologically driven work deserves consideration as an important modern art movement.

"This is an area of contemporary art that has been completely overlooked by the commercial world because it's been so non-commodified," said Nora Atkinson, the Renwick's curator.

Of course, some compromises to the art were inevitable. "This is all painted with Nochar, ironically enough," said the artist Michael Garlington, referring to a brand of fire retardant he was using for his towering installation, "The Paper Arch," created with Natalia Bertotti. "Whereas we'd usually build things as flammable as possible, here we're making it safe and sound."

There were other challenges. How does Burning Man's principle of radical participation translate to the "look, don't touch" propriety of museums? And will the festival learn to speak the institutional language of "outreach and education"?

Those challenges were part of the show's appeal for both parties. Touching will be encouraged for most works, and outreach is precisely what Burning Man is after. In the process, both cultural institution and countercultural event may re-evaluate their relationships to the mainstream. "That's going to be a really cool outcome if the lines get blurred," said Kim Cook, Burning Man's director of art and civic engagement. "If we're not so far out and the museum isn't so far in."

Ms. Atkinson, who recently attended her first Burning Man, contrasted that experience with the frenzied marketplace of Art Basel Miami, another annual fair of similar size and duration. In Miami, art is a product; an investment. At Burning Man, art is a manifestation of communal values, like inclusion and participation, that generate playful work emphasizing in[illegible] economies.

Those qualities make Burning Man art "less attractive in the conventional world of galleries," Mr. Harvey said. "But at the same time the great potency of this is that it's a social movement." That said, some of the works are acquired after the event by cities or businesses. And Burning Man is eager to help its artists make a living beyond the desert.

The exhibition includes sculptures, art cars, light installations (including one by Leo Villareal that is part of the Renwick's permanent collection), virtual reality experiences, jewelry and costume displays, an immersive temple (one of the show's three commissioned works), and a documented history of the event organized by the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno. The Renwick also teamed up with the Golden Triangle Business Improvement District to extend the exhibition into the neighborhood, where six installations — among them, a giant bear made of pennies and a bronze head of Maya Angelou — will inhabit parks and sidewalks.

Burning Man has bohemian roots and can be seen as a descendant of Dada, Allan Kaprow's Happenings and the psychedelic Merry Pranksters. Yet the Renwick is the arm of the Smithsonian dedicated to American craft, and "No Spectators" celebrates Burning Man as a hub of modern maker culture. The Arts and Crafts movement was born in response to the Industrial Revolution, and Ms. Atkinson suggests that Burning Man art responds to the digital and information revolutions.

"Each time we take another one of these technological leaps, there needs to be a balancing humanist force that keeps us connected," she said. The link between Silicon Valley and Burning Man in both proximity and attendance is no accident, she pointed out.

But what happens when art shaped by utopian principles and intended as a civic gift to a temporary city is uprooted from its native white sands and replanted within white walls across the street from the White House, suddenly subject to the scrutiny of critics, curators and busy tourists?

"This is the heart of the experiment now," Ms. Cook said. "When you move into another context, how much cultural integrity can you maintain and insist upon?" The experiment she refers to is the expansion of Burning Man. In recent years, the organization — which has dozens of full-time, year-round employees — has been

planning its long-term legacy. In 2011, it shifted from a limited liability company to a nonprofit, consolidating previously independent entities, like the Black Rock Arts Foundation, under one roof.

Since the Bureau of Land Management has capped attendance at the Burning Man event at about 70,000 people, the organization is exploring new ways to spread the gospel. Museums and municipalities are potential apostles. The goal is "a global movement which is not purely event-based anymore," Ms. Cook said. "It's as much about engaged citizenship and quality of interaction as it is about having a function."

Burning Man and the Smithsonian have worked closely together to ensure that values are upheld while institutional needs are met. Admission to the Smithsonian, as always, is free. A licensing agreement lets Burning Man review signage and press materials and set guidelines for merchandising and sponsorship. Nothing with the Burning Man name or logo will be sold in the gift shop; no corporate sponsors are acknowledged near the artwork, though the Renwick's exhibition is supported by Intel and the Golden Triangle's by Lyft.

The Smithsonian is also enlisting local Burners, as the festivalgoers are known, as gallery volunteers to help interpret and enhance the experience. And a docent manual that Burning Man helped develop offers suggestions for promoting deeper encounters in the Burning Man spirit: "Think about facilitating interactions rather than simply sharing information."

Here's a look at several featured artists and collectives adapting their Burning Man art to the white-walled museum world. Ms. Bertotti noted that the work "takes on a different preciousness here." But then, adaptability is a Burning Man virtue.

David Best

The first temple that the sculptor David Best contributed to Burning Man, in 2000, was not meant to be a memorial but turned into one when a young artist he worked with was killed in a motorcycle accident weeks before the event. The following year, he was asked to build a temple for Burning Man, which became a place to mourn losses and mark transitions. Burning Man has built a temple every

year since, one of its annual traditions. It is ceremoniously burned to conclude the event. “The fire can heal and seal and protect something,” Mr. Best said.

His temples were an impetus for the Renwick’s exhibition. “I don’t know if I would have done this show if I couldn’t have David in it,” Ms. Atkinson said. For “No Spectators,” Mr. Best and his crew are transforming the second-floor Grand Salon into a sanctuary encased in ornately carved raw wood panels with a central chandelier that descends to meet an altar. “I use beauty as a trap to catch the most pained person,” he said. “It has to be delicate and strong at the same time.”

Mr. Best, 72, has made eight temples for Burning Man and several more beyond the desert, notably in 2015 in Londonderry, Northern Ireland. “When I turned 60, I said I’m only going to work with people. I stopped showing in galleries,” he said. “When I stopped that game, that system of objects for sale, it freed me. I promised myself when I turned 70 I was only going to do priceless work.”

Michael Garlington and Natalia Bertotti

Mr. Garlington, 41, and Ms. Bertotti, 33, met at Burning Man in 2012. He was an established photographer and a Burning Man veteran, having been a member of Mr. Best’s temple crew and the Department of Public Works, the group that builds the infrastructure for their temporary Black Rock City. She was a newbie, not then an artist.

Their first collaboration was “The Photo Chapel” in 2013, a Gothic-style sanctuary clad in provocative black-and-white photography (some with Ms. Bertotti as subject), which established their signature style of spiritual Tramp art. (At the Renwick recently, Mr. Garlington wore a Frida Kahlo pin and called her an inspiration.) The more ambitious “Totem of Confessions” followed in 2015. Both pieces were burned in the desert.

The 15-foot-tall “Paper Arch,” which the Renwick commissioned, is made of wood, paper, fabric and found objects and conceals two peepholes in its base. It is covered in photos of people (including Susan Sarandon and Willem Dafoe), flora and fauna, and repeated prints of an eye — his mother’s — that Mr. Garlington has

tattooed on his forearm. “Our tag line is ‘the horror and the wonder,’” he said. But for the arch, they decided, “let’s just put the wonder in.”

Five Ton Crane

In 2007, the 40-foot-tall rusted metal Steampunk Tree House sprouted from the desert during Burning Man, made by a group of Oakland-based friends. From that project came Five Ton Crane, a collective that now boasts more than 170 artists, among them painters, welders, graphic designers, programmers, light and sound artists and woodworkers. “It becomes less about the individual ego and more about the process and collaborative nature of building these things,” Sean Orlando, a co-founder, said of their ethos.

Over the past decade Five Ton Crane has brought charming art cars and fanciful installations to Burning Man. For the Renwick, the collective contributed “Capitol Theater,” a 12-seat Art Deco movie theater on the back of a big red bus — an example of what is known at Burning Man as a Mutant Vehicle. Three films will be shown on a loop, including a six-minute German abstract impressionist dance and a silent melodrama created by the collective. Small moments of discovery are buried throughout: colorful dioramas hidden in vintage film reels, a discarded fictional newspaper.

“We pride ourselves on our craftsmanship and the level of detail in all of our pieces,” Mr. Orlando said. “We want people to explore it.”

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