

Interview with Larry Harvey

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Burning Man is the most fascinating festival, or whatever you call it, in the Western World, no doubt about that. One of the many things that make it unique is the ethical, societal content you give to it in your speeches and through the rules that you enforce on the playa: a money-less society, the gift economy, self expression, leave no trace, the importance of volunteer work, radical inclusiveness, etc.

But on the other hand it remains a six day event in the middle of nowhere with no impact whatsoever on society. Conservative America can rest assured: all these creative, energetic people spending all that time and money to create a fata morgana in the desert. As long as they spend their time on that they don't use it on politically relevant subjects. Burning Man as opium for the people?

I'd love to get to the political phase of Burning Man because that's when you start rearranging the furniture. But I think that you have to go through certain stages of experience for it not to be just another version of the same thing. I've learned to be patient, humble. Because if you start with the premise that culture is a naturally occurring, self organising process then you can't force it. You can help it. You can accelerate its development. As anything in nature it's a chaotic system but very subtly and more intricately ordered than anything we can create.

People learn civic virtue here. This has been a nursery school for that. And a lot of the younger people really need that because they just see society as a vending machine. They don't see that there's a social contract. We've created a model, an experiment, indeed an initiation that has led to the formation of positive, constructive values. And a renewed believe in the possibility of transcendence. Transcending your isolation as an individual, transcending the small confines of the 100 people you can keep up a relationship with. Identifying with society itself. And people will begin to realise that they can apply the ethos, the values that they've learned here on how an entire society might function.

I think that to recreate workable politics in our present world, we first have to toil in our vineyard. It may not seem apparent now, but what we've patiently been doing is preparing the ground. And that ground is to recreate the basis by which culture itself can be generated. And what needs to happen, is that we have to start with the individual and then work to a sense of the communal and then work to a sense of the civic and then work to a sense of the universal.

As the dialogues continues people will be more and more intelligently informed and develop a coherent philosophy. That's part of my job: to give them some ideas on what their experience should coalesce around. I can number of the phrases that we've used. But they really mean something because they're continually grounded through this

ritual founded in dirt, in immediate experience. And as that intellectual sophistication grows, that will be a means to form a consensus within the community, so that masses, thousands on thousands of people, begin say yes, that's something that should be done. And at a certain moment what will happen is people will self-initiate political action. Everything we've learned at BRC is scalable to a much larger domain.

If it hasn't yet borne through as organised political effort. That's because we have to till the field, remove the rocks, and nurture the vines, until the cultural factor self interpenetrates the lives of those that have gone through this experience. And hundreds like them across the country.

But in all societal changes there has been a role for leadership.

That's what we're about to assert. The most important event that will occur on the playa this year -and probably the least conspicuous- will be a summit meeting with all our regional representatives. We founded a non-profit organisation, the Burning Man network, which binds them to us and protects the interests of the community.

We have 80 and upwards and it's a very interesting story because it illustrates some of our basic principles. Our philosophy has always been that we offer a social context for culture to self-organise. What we've always done is watch the growth of the community as it takes place through numberless interactions. And as creative action emerges, to learn from that ourselves and then lead by taking new steps so that it provides a model to others and teach us all what we value.

The regional people have spontaneously began to contact us and say we want to get in touch with other participants. In essence they were saying we don't want to stop being as we were on BM. We began to link them up. And as time went on we began to offer them advice in particular instances because they were facing problems we were facing years before and develop tools or philosophies. We put them on a list so they could talk to one another

Now we founded a non profit whose mission it is to promote *socially robust interactive art*. That is art that requires community for its production and actually produces ad hoc a community in its exhibition. What we've always done is emphasize the importance of art, in part because marching under the legitimizing banner of art makes you get away with quite a lot. You can be the court jester, you can say things that would not be permitted otherwise.

What we're going to encourage through the non-profit organization, is that they're not be content by simply forming refuges from the world. What we'll particularly do is create art events that uses the public space in their home town. Many have told us very sincerely that BM has changed their lives, then our question to them is, well why can't it change the life of their neighbors? It's always been one of our rules: radical inclusivity.

We'll show them how we can all unite and form a united network with formed governance and institutions. We're going to divide the group up into geographic regions and ask larger organisations to mend towards the smaller groups. They begin to form a real community on earth. I believe this is ultimately the foot in the door. It will be the first part of the third phase of Burning Man, after communal life on the beach, and the civic community in the desert.

And you think the Internet will play a role in this?

When the Internet came along people said it will change everything and then the future didn't seem to happen. Part of that was because people mistook the nature of the media. They thought it was like TV. We've always known that that the real power of it was, and one of the highest and best uses, to organise social networks. And I see the political implications of that. There are a series of events that have fascinated me. Falung Gong, Zapatistas, the WTO protesters have used the internet to organise. China executes of middle and top level bureaucrats because they know people are talking on the internet. Of course flash mobs do it. But all this is mostly negative. We have learned over the years at BM to use the Internet in a constructive way. Our extranet is like a great open studio where each group has a space to organise in and then look in on other people's efforts. And it's a very potent tool for people to organize. We have learned that the internet is most potent and most useful when it coincides to real living, breathing communities where people struggle together, share resources.

When you can really unify sentiment the result is tremendously potent. What we're able to do because of the real community behind it is to cause thousands of people to write unique letters based on information we given them. And those are very very potent. You walk into a senators office and the first thing you see in the front office is the big map.

Look at the inherent power of the internet as the tool to completely turn around this consumer apparatus that completely dominated the last half of the twentieth century. The internet will change the world like the printing press did.

You've already had to lobby to Washington?

The Black Rock Desert is now a national conservation area. In that process was a great political battle which took place. And it pitted the rangers and the real estate developers, against the very organised environmental organisation. That was trying a fourth time to designate this in such a way that there was slightly more protection to the environment. We became caught in the middle. We had hoped to be neutral and friend to all, but became apparent that we couldn't.

We began by visiting the offices of the congressmen and senators of the Bay area, we found that creating relationships with their staff would do most of the work, that you're halfway there. We didn't hire a lobby firm, what it turned out that in more than one case the people on the staff had relatives who had come to the event. So we had ourselves organised in this end, that they sent a message preparing our entrance in Washington. We were very well received and as a result we caused a federal agency to change it policy. It was indeed instructive.

We were offered the opportunity by the environmentalists to write ourselves into the legislation and therefore assure our survival. We found out how laws get written. They're written by lobbyists. I didn't understand how naked it was. They said well, OK, write it! At first it was even suggested to include it in law itself, you know, "Burning Man is secured", we said well that's a little extreme, let's put "large scale events".

What struck me that the two sides were polarized but each motivated by very ideological positions that prevented them from talking to one another. We've been something of a moderator and it was perfectly obvious to me that they cared essentially about the same

things. Everybody's positive values could have been achieved if we actually got them in the same room. But oh no they completely demonised one another, they completely misunderstood one another. It's often a mistake to demonise or to regard the things that you disapprove of as simply "evil" and therefore unworthy of examination. Our president learned a lesson from that.

Burning Man and religion. The Christian right is vehemently opposed to Burning man because it is a pagan humanistic event. Their worst nightmare is that labour day will become a religious event, with young children burning a man in their front yard to celebrate the pagan humanistic gods. And then, almost adding insult to injury, you choose "beyond belief" as the central theme of the 2003 event. Why?

Last year our theme was Waterworld, so people came to see me at the end and ask me "what's the theme next year": Wild West world or so? And it all sounded like a Disney attraction. I made a vow to do a theme next year that Disney would never touch. I like to provoke. What I wanted to do this year was to make it possible for people to engage in a dialogue about spiritual values. It's almost to the point that you can talk about bestiality at the dinner table but if you bring up spiritual experience, there's no way to communicate about it.

When people ask me what my beliefs are I say: I've had a mystical experience and in some sense that makes me a mystic. But I'm also a thorough grown atheist and I don't see any necessary contradiction between the two. I don't believe in some gaseous vertebrate ordering human affairs, it's absurd, it's childish. But I have had a mystical experience. I know how they work, how they affect people, and I had it. And in some way it's permanently in my heart in a way that has allowed me to be more fully that I could ever have without it.

I know from my experience that the most significant things I've done were based on a leap off the ladder of proof. We have no choice but to live by faith, but to seek for what feels essential within us and project it out into the world as vision that guides us. But we have no proof. If I hadn't had faith in this from the beginning it would never have existed. It was a time when I was the only person on earth who had that faith. And now we got 30.000 people with some version of that faith.

I also want them to understand that this is a spiritual movement, I want them to be able to value it that way, to exchange immediate experience with one another. Later on when it becomes a political movement I think that will give it a robust power. And make it act with confidence.

Every society I believe, needs a transcendent core that is larger than them, but which reflects every individual, like a mirror, a receive back a greater identity towards all who experience it. The Man for years has had a sacred identity. From the beginning the plan was to put the Man in the centre of the experience, with the provision that that we do not define what it meant. We said that that emerges from your experience. Now, to be open minded is not to be empty headed. A whole discourse has grown up around it. Not so much about what it means, but *how* it means. And look at the fruit of it, how it unifies, how it connects them to one another. But we've done this in this utterly non coercive way. We have in effect created the experience of religion but we've disintermediated the political apparatus of religion. There aren't any priests, we just took them out and said: you and your experience.

The danger of religion has always been that it appeals to unconditional realities that, when applied to secular affairs, are among the most dangerous things on earth. It is dangerous when you create a power with authority that derives from an absolute source. And yet people have the need to feel that within themselves there is something of absolute value. Unconditional value. That you are a vision and like any vision, transformative and unconditional in its value. You need to have that, to share that feeling with other people and you need to feel that you're united collectively by that. But I cannot see why people can possess these experiences while at the same time the potential for political coercion is removed.

But I'm not going to climb up the mountain and come down with the ten commandments. Everybody knows we make the man. He didn't descend from heaven. I don't think that even I could get away with saying "the man says that you must..." Our community wouldn't allow it. It would shrink down to a few diluted souls that would put on their tennis shoes to catch the space ship. This is a satire, I hope you noticed. That's the provocation: some people will come out serious and then maybe they'll achieve that wonderful intelligent ironic ability to see it as both at the same time.

One reason the right has so much power is because they have this dreadfully literal interpretation of religion, very authoritarian. They are nevertheless inspired by faith. It's a mistake to just ignore people you disapprove of. For them the power of faith is a very powerful thing. How they got a corner on it I don't understand. We just let it happen because we were saying to one another well you live your way and I live mine. And that's how a minority in this government came to govern it where the majority of the people are very much more like Europe. But they are disarmed and unable to act.

Consumerism and the entire apparatus that supports it intends to not only exploit culture but to simply dissolve it and to isolate everyone for everyone else and to define themselves strictly in terms of their manipulated desires. But the great appeal of consumerism, that appears to every new tribe that encounters it, is that they can have things *their way*. They can be individuals. And to not understand the valid, the real and spiritual appeal of that to people is to be blind.

So the only way to win this struggle is to compete on the same ground. So our message to people is that yes, it's all about what *you are*. The difference between us and consumerism is that what they sell to people are simulations of authenticity. Elusions of being. And we're offering them the actual thing.

And if people don't think that's attractive, then witness this rapidly growing city where people are going in the harshest possible environment, the most inconvenient place and all of those things that make supposedly make consumers so attracted: convenience, comfort, no it turns out what they really wanted, and what consumerism really exploits, is what religion is always been preoccupied with: and that's the opportunity *to be*. And to be in successively larger units too. To belong to yourself, to belong to other, to belong to the stars, I think that in our modern world we have to reverse that continuum. We've got to start with the individual.

In former times the individual was not important. In our world -and I embrace this, I'm an American- there is the supreme value of the individual. The one thing European will tell me when they're over here, is that, yeah in terms of social identity and communal life,

relationships, that America is a wasteland, but the other things they'll say, well we wouldn't get away with this at home. The ideal thing would be if you could combine both, and I don't know why not. That working from Europe and working from here that wisdom couldn't be achieved.

About Europe and America. We wonder whether there is enough time left for the generation-long transformation process you describe, when you see the speed by which this administration is changing the basic rules of geopolitics.

Don't worry. We're going to do such a bad job in Iraq it's going to turn into a Vietnam. It's only dawning them that, although they were dreaming of an American imperium, cut out Europe and so, that we can't even afford Iraq. Our credit card's maxed out. There were trying to change the basic premises of geopolitics but they're going to fail, for material reasons. Most people were saying: my god, the only sane ones are the Europeans. Hey the Germans, alright!

We Americans, in our absolutely appalling naiveté, have gotten so far from the practice of democracy that we actually think there's no cultural basis for it. You can summon them up, have an election and all you need is maybe some voting machines and they'll elect and drive SUVs and then they'll be like us. It would take an entire generation to change Iraq and a real kind of idealism that they don't even have.

It seems like that's exactly what you're trying to do for America. Mr Harvey, thank you for the interview.