

# The world According to Larry

INTERVIEW BY ROB SIDON



PHOTO: SCOTT LONDON

**Common Ground: Good to see you again, Larry. What's foremost on your mind as we approach Labor Day?**

Larry Harvey: Next year! If I've done my job, there shouldn't be anything for me to do once the events starts. If I am needed, something's wrong.

**CG: I'm impressed. That bespeaks a great team.**

LH: You bet. We've been doing this for a long time, and we're experts in our field. Plus no one else quite does what we do.

**CG: What do you love most about Burning Man?**

LH: The people I meet. We've created a culture that filters folks. It's radically inclusive but nonetheless creates a benign filter that ensures I end up meeting wonderful people all the time — at the event and through the rest of the year.

**CG: Your greatest concern?**

LH: That in the long-term planning, we don't get it right. We're trying to found a number of things with a projected life beyond my lifetime. We've fed a culture, and cultures self-perpetuate, and I think ours has vigor that will self-replicate, but it's crucial that we get it right. That tends to concentrate one's wits. In some ways, things feel more crucial than they ever have.

**CG: So you wonder how Burning Man might look 50 years from now?**

LH: Oh yeah, that's what we're working on. Next year will be our 25th — the silver jubilee if it were a marriage. The event is replenishing itself. Unlike a lot of things, it's not defined by just one age cohort. It's thriving. I've no trouble imagining it lasting another 25 years and more. We're in the process of shedding the cor-

poration into a non-profit in order to help take care of the employees who have been with us for so many years and allow them to advance in leadership and responsibility in our absence. We're involved in a reorganization from top to bottom; it's going to be very interesting.

**CG: You're just back from New York?**

LH: There is a thriving Burning Man event on Governor's Island in the middle of the East River that's growing like top seed. It's part of the new urbanism that's sweeping the nation and with it a new interest in interactive art in cities all around the world. There's a cultural Diaspora going on around Burning Man, with regional initiatives out there independent of our organization's urgings. And yet there are many things we think we can do to help. In New York, at first they had to argue like irritable tenants in a tenement building for three or four years. Finally, being New Yorkers, they had to do something in a big, ambitious way, and they're doing it, drawing thousands of people.

**CG: The culture spreads beyond the desert. What's another similar regional event?**

LH: There are dozens; they're on our Web site. The oldest is in Austin.

**CG: What happened at Baker Beach in 1986?**

LH: I just called a friend, Jerry James, and said, "Let's build a man and burn him on the beach." We both had some background in construction. We were both single fathers and we'd routinely take our kids out to the batteries and have imaginary gunfights. Once we went to

the woodshop and made imaginary guns out of wood. I don't want to offend your readers [laughs] but once, an outraged woman who thought we were teaching our kids to be warmongers accosted us. I don't know if that was a bad example for the boys, but we were just affirming our constitutional rights to bear imaginary arms, so we shot her. It all came out of playing. One day the boys built a wooden dog, and Jerry and I built the wooden man, and we burned them both on the beach. The boys were very young and didn't persevere with the dog idea. Otherwise, Burning Dog might have been big today. [laughs]

**CG: So what happened?**

LH: We went down to Baker Beach, installed these figures at the tide line, stuffed them with burlap, doused them with gasoline, and put a match to them and they practically exploded. [laughs] And that attracted attention ... more attention than we'd imagined. People came running to see this thing. It was a human figure and it was on fire. That is guaranteed to attract attention anywhere, anytime. [laughs]

It was the interest of strangers that instilled us with ambition. We had impressed people we didn't know. And they had joined in. A guy with a guitar started improvising a song, which sounded pretty good, about fire. A woman held his hand

as the figures burned. In that was the seed of a founding of a tradition. That's a true story.

**CG: It's a perfect seed. Do you tell that story a lot?**

LH: Yeah, but I keep thinking about it, so I remember new things. I just told you about the gun thing. I've never told any reporter about that.

**CG: [laughs] I never quite thought of myself as a reporter, but people always tell me their imaginary-gun stories. In any event, I don't get the impression that the novelty factor of Burning Man has worn off of you.**

LH: No, it doesn't. Nevertheless, it is a ritual, so certain things happen again and again. So if you're looking for pure novelty, you won't get it. But with so many people who are so diverse coming from nearly everywhere bringing new ideas and fresh inspiration, if you're jaded there then maybe you should look at yourself. Maybe you're projecting some inner contradiction or limitation onto what you encounter. I mean, if you're bored in Paris, what's wrong with you?

**CG: [laughs] I lived in Paris for ten years.**

LH: Some people would censor me for this, but if someone comes thinking, "I am going to debauch myself and I am going to party," well that stales. Everybody knows that. There's this idea of radical self-expression, and sometimes people will interpret that as having a license to defy convention, a license to be naughty. But that wears out. Once they've broken conventions, people kind of run out of ideas if that's their standard of originality. They'll run out of

conventions to flout. But I've always thought radical self-expression doesn't mean so much flouting but being bold enough to reach deep down in oneself and find that portion of your own experience that makes you unique. And then it takes courage to push that out there and share that with the world. Now that's a radical act. That's reaching deep and stretching out at the same time. That doesn't get old. If there's a spiritual dimension, it does not get old. If there's no spiritual dimension, things go flat pronto.

**CG: Burning Man is defined as "an annual experiment in temporary community dedicated to radical self-expression and radical self-reliance."**

LH: They're aspects of the same thing. If you're going to engage in radical self-expression, you need to engage in radical self-reliance — you need to use your own resources. You need to find out what's in you, particularly when we're used to living in a consumer world in which every experience is buffered and muffled and made so convenient that it just flatters your expectations. But that turns into a very dull world after a while. That breeds a lust for novelty that will never be satisfied — that's what consumerism is driven by. Burning Man has always been a critique of consumerism. It's more relevant now than it ever was. That's what's got me excited.

Given the times ... I don't know if you've noticed, but out there in the world, in response to this economic debacle, people are looking for more in life. They're trying to be more economical, but they've awakened to the reality that our consumer paradise held only empty satisfactions, and it's affecting public behavior. I know I'm just riffing here, but ...



PHOTOS: PHIL STEELE (BURNMONKEY.COM)

**CG: But it's on the money, and leads directly into the theme of this year's event: evolution.**

LH: Last year the theme was "the American dream," where for those who cared to read the text, I described how we live in the "squalid sordor of a second gilded age," and it anticipated the bursting of the bubble. In preparing the theme for this year, believing as I did that we were all going over a cliff, I thought, "What could I say for certain?" And I realized I couldn't say anything except that we're all going to have to adapt to very changed circumstances. So what better theme than evolution, which is all about adaptation? And sure enough, everyone I know is engaged in rigorous struggle to adapt to much-altered circumstances right now. In my little parlor games, I ask everyone I meet "How has it affected you?" and everyone has a story.

**CG: Let's bring it home. How is Burning Man specifically a Bay Area phenomenon?**

LH: You couldn't have founded Burning Man anywhere else. If this had been in LA, everyone would have asked, "Who's the producer?" and that would have been a complete nonstarter. If we'd tried to do it in New York, people would have wanted to know how the activity would fit into a very competitive professional environment. Whereas the Bay Area is more about self-expression, New York is more about self-assertion. Everybody would have competed with each other, and that wouldn't have worked. The Bay Area is a place that is friendly and welcoming to the inspired amateur. People here are less interested in what you do professionally than what you aspire to be. It's part of the charm. 🐼



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