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## Burning Man devotees set the night on fire in West Oakland

Jane Ganahl

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Not to cast aspersions on the entirety of the Burning Man clique, but they seem to follow, herdlike, the brightest object in the vicinity.

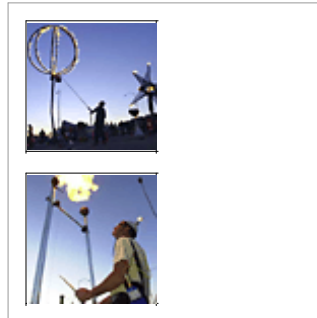
No sooner has the La Fiebre dance company finished its set onstage at the Fire Arts Festival, drawing ahhhhs and applause for its "wearable fire sculpture" costumes, than a huge metal structure nearby that resembles a crown of thorns is set ablaze by the artist. Ahhhhh! The crowd turns its collective head, and shuffles south in the parking lot to watch. Another shiny object has captured its attention.

If you're not part of the Burning Man community, it's not easy to grok why you would want to spend a Saturday night in a parking lot under I-880 whiffing flammable gas and getting a sunburn in the dark from things catching fire around you. Plus, it's a bad place to go if you either have a healthy fear of fire or have had a tough week that has rendered you jittery. Each time something goes off near you, in a loud kaboom that falls between train whistle and earthquake, it takes a few moments to recover.

Other than that, this is a swell party, and the revelers' joy is infectious.

"I haven't missed a single Burning Man since '98," says a broadly grinning man in an Edwardian costume festooned with bendable light sticks. He gives his name as Shy Giant, but he is not. "The Fire Arts Festival is a good way for us all to see each other again; Aug. 30 seems a long way away!"

That would be the opening day for Burning Man 2004, taking place in the Black Rock Desert 120 miles north of Reno. Last year, more than 30,000 people from 20 countries gathered to revel in the (I'm quoting the Web site here) "annual experiment in temporary community dedicated to radical self-expression and radical self-reliance." Translation: a week of

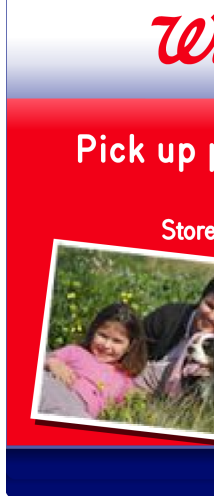


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camping, dancing around in pagan costumes, Porta Pottis, spiritual awakenings and lots and lots of fire.

On this final evening of the Fire Arts Festival, several of the sculptures that will be dragged to the desert over Labor Day are on display across the street from the Crucible, a West Oakland industrial arts nonprofit devoted to craftsmanship in fire, metal and glassworks. For obvious reasons, the Burning Man/Crucible festival is co-sponsored by the Oakland Fire Department, which has trucks stationed throughout the acre-sized parking lot.

Burning Man brings out every kind of human being -- not just those who love wearing the pink feather boas, latex and petticoats favored by this evening's Boho set. One young Montgomery Street-looking man in Ralph Lauren (and illuminated crown) strides by, yelling into his cell phone, "Dude, you gotta come. It's too good! Don't worry about the neighborhood."

"Why do I love fire?" ponders Emily Olsen of Berkeley, in pink leopard- print miniskirt and fishnet tights. "Because it's both scary and beautiful. Because you can't tame it."

The graphic designer, though just in her 20s, has been to several Burning Man festivals. "It's the one time of year you can just leave your existence completely and get outside yourself..."

She pauses to watch a band of stilt-walkers pass by, wearing gothic, executioner-style head coverings that spurt flame. Ahhhh!

The Kook Troupe -- a dance company -- takes the stage, doing a good- humored bump-and-grind in circus-meets-porn-star costumes. During their performance, a tall lily-pad sculpture nearby erupts in flame, startling those in the vicinity, who applaud once they've collected their wits. Then Xenon, the well-established performance collective that specializes in aerial arts and fire play, takes center stage with a flame-throwing fire truck (isn't it supposed to be the other way around?), a trapeze artist and acrobatic bicycles.

A stage announcer then draws the audience's attention to the evening's piece de resistance, "Singularity Machine," a whirling vortex of fire by artist Nate Smith. The tornado is released a bit at a time -- a small swirl of orange that grows to a huge pillar of flame maybe 30 feet high. It's absolutely stunning; you can hear the thousand or so spectators holding their breath.

The evening reaches its climax with the appearance of Mutaytor, which could best be described as a large, noisy, pagan vaudeville act. "We are the Mutaytor because evolution takes too long!" bellows its leader. Hoops of fire tease the audience while a pack of percussionists pound out jungle rhythms in the background. Too much to look at at once, but Burning Man loyalists eat it up, moving and grooving and waving their arms.

Anyone who came to the evening reluctantly is now fully engaged in the vibe. Enough to venture forth to Burning Man for the first time? Enough to endure desert heat and dust, Porta Pottis and camping, for the sake of seeing more burning sculptures? Hmmm, perhaps there will be a recap on the 10 o'clock news.

*E-mail Jane Ganahl at [jganahl@sfchronicle.com](mailto:jganahl@sfchronicle.com).*

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