

Crimson Rose: 'Burning Man shows people a different way of looking at what they do'



Every August, a pop-up city named Black Rock City is built in the middle of the desert in the US state of Nevada. During ten days, Black Rock receives a total influx of 70 thousand people, the maximum allowed by the authorities. They come for an event that is hard to describe, a mixture of art show, dance camp and spiritual retreat named Burning Man. When two friends, Larry Harvey and Jerry James, started it in 1986, it wasn't an event. They just had an idea of building a straw man and burning it on the beach. It was the way in which people reacted — playing with the "man", singing and dancing — that convinced them they had to do it again the next year, and the year after that, and so on, until the crowd had become too big for the beach and they decided to move it to the desert. Burning Man has attracted a [number](#) of Silicon Valley executives, including Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla, Sergey Brin and Larry Page, the founders of Google. and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg. What attracts tech leaders to an artistic, spiritual event? "I think they were drawn to something that was a little different than what they're used to doing", says Crimson Rose, founding board member of the Burning Man Project. She spoke with LSE Business Review's managing editor, **Helena Vieira**, on 9 November during Web Summit, in Lisbon.

Let's start with the most basic question. What is Burning Man?

It's different for different people. It's a participatory, interactive, community that collaborates and creates a city in the middle of a dry lakebed. The Black Rock desert, which is 170 miles northeast of Reno, is the largest flat expanse in North America. It's 200 square miles of what they call playa. It's very desolate, you know? When you go there to build a pop-up city, you have to bring everything with you to survive. And we created a format. We're now on our 32nd year. This was my 26th Burning. We have ten principles that people have to agree to follow. We didn't start with these. It basically was something that came about because of what we noticed was happening. It was about inclusivity, it was about leaving no trace, because we're a guest on that desert. It was about self reliance. You had to take care of yourself. Basically you end up helping your neighbours as well. It's about participating. There are no velvet ropes in front of the art work. There's no standard that keeps you back from experiencing it. A person interacting with the art means that they are part of the artwork, not separate from it.

The first year I went, in '91, there were like 250 people in the city. This year it was 70 thousand. We become the fifth largest city in the state of Nevada for at least one hour. It peaks and then it starts dropping off. When you say, 'What is Burning Man?', each person will have their own perspective about what they think it is, which is great. If you want to go and dance for a week, there's the dance camp. If you want to ride your vehicle around, which means the vehicle has to be mutated, where you would see a lobster, an upside down cow... [El Pulpo Mecanico](#) is this googly-eyed octopus, with arms moving around and fire-spouting. We actually have our own DMV, department of mutated vehicles, to drive around. If you're creating artwork we have 300 works of art in the open playa. This year we gave out 70 grants. We have US\$1.5 million in grants to give to artists and to support them.

Is there any way to compare Burning Man to Web Summit, since you're here?

(Laughs) That's a dichotomy. I love their app that we have on our phones, but my phone continues to die... I like a physical programme, because I want to carry that around so I can make little notes, you know? I appreciate that you can connect with people that way. But for people to always be looking at their phone... What they actually need out in that square area is a large piece of art work that actually utilises technology. That I think is one thing that is sort of missing. It's like, "Here's what art can do". Something built by the architects, the engineers, and as I call them, the geeks, the freaks, the nerds and the black sheep in the family, that found themselves driven up to the desert to explore themselves, the environment and each other.

That raises an interesting question about the relationship between art and technology. Has Burning Man changed at all after the birth of the iPhone, the age of selfies, and people taking photos of everything they do every day?

People are still doing this there, and they're always posting lots of pictures. One of the questions we were talking about, when we did everything by mail... People to get into the first tier of tickets, they mailed something in. It was really delightful because we got to read all those and everything was prioritised by the stamp on the envelope. I sort of miss those days, but you know, we had to evolve to make things run smoother. Certainly leading up to the event, we're utilising technology from Salesforce. We used to use Filemaker, we don't use that anymore. The web presence, because of our web servers, the ticket processing, there are some things that we have had to change to make it easier for us. We had to. But once we're on site, certainly we use radio, our emergency service is making sure that we're connected, that if there's an issue we can communicate. We have our own hospital on site. We have our own temporary airport. We sell two things in town: ice, because we want to make sure your food stays safe, and caffeine. There's no corporate sponsorship. Nothing is sponsored by corporations. We produce the event from the money we make off it (*selling tickets*).

You became famous in certain circles after a lot of the tech leaders started attending. What do you think attracted geeks to an event that is more spiritual, about art?

I think it's because they were drawn to something that was a little different than what they're used to doing. I think they were drawn to a different way of looking at their business. That's what I heard. Some of their businesses are profit sharing now. Some of them want to know what their staff thinks, that their staff is part of the process of the business, which to me is really important. The people that are in the field in our work, emergency services, they're seeing first hand what worked and what didn't. How do we make next year better? If we don't listen to them, we're screwed. I think that's what's happening. I think that it allowed them to see something different. And because of the technology that is now a part of the artwork, if they're trying to have this beautiful..., say, the Tree of Ténéré, I believe it's 30 feet tall (*video below*). They moulded the trunk so that it looked like a tree trunk, and they had 25 thousand LED leaves that were programmable, and when a loud sound car came along, it would change colours. So, it's affected by its surrounding. I would love to see that in the square out here. It would be totally amazing. So some of those people are probably working in the industry and all of a sudden they have another outlet that was possible for them to play. And that brings in extra participants. Someone did one thing and five more went, "Oh my God, if they did that, I could do..." It really showed them a possibility that was within themselves. They could do something. Because I think sometimes people feel "I'm not creative, I can't do that", and then they just go, "Oh my God, I could do..." and I think that's showing people the possibility. Not that we're telling people what it should be, but within themselves, and that's so different for everybody.

In the beginning it was only about temporality. We had one week. A lot of the artists, they were doing such profound work, and it started breaking my heart because they now have to destroy the art work, because there's no room in their studio, or they have to cannibalise it to make something new. Now, what we're doing, really in the last ten years, we started putting art work out in civic environments, so that the average person, who is not going to go to Black Rock city, can actually enjoy it. Whether they like it or dislike it, they're talking about it. If they don't talk about it, then we haven't succeeded.

Do you consider yourselves a business?

Yes, we are a business. We started off as Black Rock City LLC (limited liability corporation) and then leading up to 2012 we created The Burning Man Project. It is the non-profit umbrella for the subsidiaries. The six founders, who were owners in the company, we actually gifted our ownership over to the Burning Man Project, for the whole community. We pay taxes. We pay lots of money in taxes. And it has to be. In the beginning we were doing it very thinly, and then we realised we needed to get a business licence, we needed the proper permits, because we were starting to get too high profile and we had to start paying taxes. For many years we had no profit. Whatever is there went right back into the company. We had to become a real organisation and be real.

You're not anti-business, you're a business. But why do you have this rule of decommodifying whatever interaction, whatever is done at Burning Man?

We don't want people to be influenced by brand names. We all have to live in this reality. We buy things, we buy food, we have to pay rent, things like that, but the whole aspect of businesses that have no soul, that are just brands, all they're doing is selling something, selling a shoe or whatever, to me that has no soul. And decommodification is still the same as when we created it. And actually Decommodification LLC is the company that holds our logo. We want to make sure that whoever comes to the event, who is recording or taping, that they're going to do it right, they're not just going to do it as a sensational thing. They get it, or they want to have a conversation really quickly with somebody and just leave... We want the press to be immersed as well, so they get the full picture.

Do you think your growth in the past few years was helped by technology, by social media?

Yes, what it did was it increased the demand for tickets. We're limited. We can only have right now 70 thousand people attending, because our landlord, the bureau of land management, which runs public land, only will allow us to have 70 thousand people. Now we're working on our next environmental assessment so that we can go up, if we want, to 100 thousand people. But 100 thousand people, if we don't have the infrastructure, and that's always the way it is, if we don't have the right infrastructure, then we'll fail. That means that we had to make sure that we had as much in place so that we can create the best environment for people to go a little crazy and be creative, which I think is really healthy for people to go a little crazy. It makes for a healthier society.

People bring their own food, but do they have to bring their own stove and gas too?

Yes. It's like camping, except that we burn a 40-foot wooden figure. I feel like that teaches self reliance, so people take care of themselves. You come, bring everything with you, and then you take your trash away. There are no trash cans in Black Rock city. Whatever you brought you need to take away. Once everybody leaves, we have a restoration crew that walks the camping area and picks up everything that shouldn't be there, because we're held to a standard by the bureau of land management. If we don't do that, we don't get a permit for the next year.

And it's good for you too, because you can tell everyone that you leave no trace behind...

Yes, and we do the moop map. Moop stands for matter out of place. It's something that shouldn't be there. We created a moop map and every time the restoration crew goes across a place and it's really bad, they mark the map red, or yellow, or green. When we started putting this on the website, all of a sudden people started getting nervous. They didn't want their camp to be red so they wanted to do better. That's good. Pressure from the rest of the participants has changed the way people behave. In that way, it's like this little society that is taking care of itself. People go, "You just dropped that, why did you?" Again it comes back to self reliance. We need to teach that and learn it, and live it.

What does burning the man symbolise?

Any art that we release by fire (we say release) means that we're letting go of our ownership, because it doesn't belong to us. It really shows us this fleeting moment of life, that life is really very precious. Before you know it, it's gone. It's about taking advantage of what's happening right then, right there, and when thousands of people are watching the fire, it's this amazing part of the ceremony. On Saturday night, when the man is released, there's this big fire and big party. It's amazing. I feel like it's really important for people to let off steam. The next night, the dichotomy of that, is that we release the temple. In 2000, one of [David Best's](#) crew members helping build the structure (it wasn't called a temple in those days), one of the crew members died in a motorcycle accident. So they decided to dedicate the structure to Michael, and they handed out little pieces of wood for people to write on: their uncle died, their miscarriage, their dog, somebody they felt passionate about... Then, they started writing directly on the temple, poems and thanking people. At that point it becomes their temple. It's not the artist's anymore, it became theirs. So on Saturday night there's this wild party and on Sunday thousands of people sit in silence. And watch the temple be released. (It's giving me goosebumps.) There's a great quote... They say that archaeologists believe that you need to submerge yourself into an unfamiliar world to understand your own. I think that's really true. Sometimes you can't put words to it. It's that gut feeling that you get... and being in a place where the desert is the highest authority. We're just visitors there. We're soft humans, don't have lizard skin to protect us from the sun, we don't have lizard eyelids to protect us from the dust. You can't have an ego in that kind of environment, or the desert will smack you down.

I was going to end with a question about technology but I think the best way is to end with this catharsis you just described....





- *This Q&A is part of a series of interviews during the [Web Summit](#) conference in Lisbon, 6-9 November 2017. The conversation was edited for clarity.*
- *The post gives the views of the interviewee, not the position of LSE Business Review or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.*
- *Featured image credit: Courtesy of Burning Man Project. Not under a Creative Commons licence. All rights reserved.*
- *When you leave a comment, you're agreeing to our [Comment Policy](#).*