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THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS DRINK BLENDER

From the book [This Is Burning Man](#) By Brian Doherty

Excerpted in [The Denver Post](#)

A swirl of claims, some contradictory, runs through the endless conversation that Burning Man engenders in its devotees and detractors. You'll hear them over and over again at parties, jubilees, raves, fundraisers, late-night welding sessions, tugboat soirees, intimate desert rituals: Burning Man creates artists; Burning Man is self-indulgent play; Burning Man renews lives; Burning Man destroys lives; Burning Man changes the world; Burning Man is a dangerous catastrophe.

For six years Jim Mason was one of Burning Man's most tenacious and excessive artists, living out all of those dichotomies. He has a wide, babyishly blank face (even when covered in a few days' unshaven beard, as it often is) beneath his dirty blond hair (usually longish and tangled). His characteristic outfit is a dull-silver full-body fire-protection suit, which he has taken to wearing even during those (rare) moments when his catching himself on fire is only a remote possibility.

Mason is not a scientist, but his day job has been written up in Scientific American. He's creating a database of all of the world's surviving languages, a Utopian-linguist scheme known as the Rosetta Project, which is part of Stewart Brand's Long Now Foundation. Brand was one of Ken Kesey's Merry Prankster pals and the impresario behind the January 1966 Trips Festival (the apotheosis, or selling out, of Kesey's Acid Tests), one of the first public ticketed events in America to turn life into a theatrical happening and vice versa, to embrace incongruous and chemically enhanced freaky community publicly as a viable and even holy pursuit. Brand's Trips Festival and the Kesey movement from which it arose struck devastating blows that made chinks in consensual reality; Burning Man is now bulldozing boldly and heedlessly through those chinks and building an entire mini-civilization around some of those same impulses that inspired the Kesey scene.

The threads of cultural rebellion and social evolution wind through American history, tracing strange coincidences and karmic connections: Stewart Brand to Jim Mason, the Acid Tests to Burning Man. Mason got his job not through the New York Times but through Burning Man. His supervisor, Alexander Rose, a fellow Burner, told a reporter from SF Weekly profiling the Rosetta Project that he recognized, after watching Mason achieve the absurd and improbable at Burning Man, that Mason was "someone more than willing to try desperately audacious tasks."

In 1995, Jim Mason was not an artist. He was an anthropologist supervising a cross-cultural art exchange between the people of New Guinea and Stanford University, organizing a sculpture garden of New Guinean art on Stanford's campus. Then he discovered Burning Man. "I first heard about it as a rave," Mason tells me. "I went out there because I like the desert. I spent most of my youth destroying the desert in Southern California with various motorcycles and dune buggies. While destroying it, I developed a tremendous appreciation for it. Deserts have always been my most strongly felt landscapes.

"I also spent much of my youth around machines, and as an anthropologist I had an interest in cultural appropriation. So the notion of taking curiosities from urban environments and employing them in the blank desert with these curious new

readings on them appealed to me greatly. A combination of deserts with improvisational anthropology and machines pretty much summarized my life. I had made motorcycles and dune buggies before-functional things. But Burning Man helped me realize there was this thing called 'installation art'-which I came to realize was basically conceptually motivated building. I went to college to be a mechanical engineer, but I ended up doing anthropology because I became much more interested in cultural interpretation."

Mason, with his six-figure Stanford education behind him, is more bourgeois-intellectual in background than many of the machine workers and radical grease monkeys who build crazy shit at Burning Man. He's spent a good part of his life in a world where Burning Man's particular combination of qualities is very unusual indeed, a fact that helped him develop a well-honed sense of irony and ridiculousness about the whole business. He tells me about how Burning Man turned him from an anthropologist to an artist.

"By the time I decided to go to Burning Man in 1995, I was clear on the notion that you were supposed to bring bullshit there and build. In true Jim Mason form, I rented a piece-of-shit single-axle U-Haul and stacked it with an unbelievable amount of steel-three thousand pounds on a truck built to handle around fifteen hundred pounds. Of course the axle broke, and it took fourteen hours to get [to the playa]. I had the notion of a community welding camp. I thought I'd bring a bunch of steel and people would show up and we could all weld things. All I brought was an oxyacetylene torch. I didn't realize then that if you weld things together seriously, you are supposed to have arc welders."

From that inauspicious beginning, he leaped the next year to what he still considers his favorite project at Burning Man.

"I brought a bunch of rusted steel water pipe and made a desert forest spread out over two miles of the Black Rock Desert. It was like a minimalist Zen garden, with the pipes forming the shapes of cacti. It was a very spare arrangement, done visually in relation to the sides of the mountains and valleys surrounding the playa. I did it ten miles away from where the rest of the Burning Man encampment was, so very few people saw it. But the people who found out through word of mouth drove out to find it. I didn't care about the audience. I was having an art experience."

Back then, before Burning Man's reputation became inextricably linked with that of the Black Rock Playa, the playa was mainly known for being that enormous, utterly empty place where people set land-speed records in jet cars. Locals out to blow off some steam-and BLM law enforcement-were used to driving carelessly and swiftly through Black Rock's trackless vastness.

"Of course, people ran into it," says Mason. "They might be driving a hundred miles an hour in the desert, and suddenly there's a steel tree sticking out. Some good ol' boys from Reno took one out. They were all pissed off and came and found the guy responsible for the damn metal trees. They came to my camp with guns trying to find me, and I wouldn't come out. So they completely trashed my Bronco. They wanted to discuss the damage to their truck, and when they weren't able to have that discussion, they expressed their upsetness on the wires and vacuum system of my Bronco.

"It's the biggest thing anyone ever did out there, although it had a very slight visual weight because the individual trees were so small and so spread out. But the BLM got pissed about it. Michael Michael wasn't very pleased. I mean, everyone liked the idea of it, but the practical reality bothered them. I was calling the piece the Forest of Meditation. People were calling it the Forest of Death.

"I've thought about redoing that project as a proper permitted thing and doing much larger pieces over a larger part of the desert. Have it be sort of a Christo project at Black Rock. As is often the case, that first thoughtless, naive thing you go out there and do is the best thing you ever do. And it cost Burning Man zero and cost me about a thousand bucks."

Although it did not end in fire-the ultimate statement of passionate ephemerality that epitomizes Burning Man-Mason's steel forest was still for the moment, for those who were there to experience it. Mason has no aerial photos that capture the entire pattern. And shots of the single trees-well, they miss the forest. Mason has me clamber up a makeshift ladder to the loft where he sleeps, where a photo of one of the trees is on the wall. It looks like some alien insect's quivering, questing antennae breaking through the extraplanetary crust of the Black Rock Playa. But the photo is ultimately just dots on a page-only a shadow of an experience.

* * *

After '96, Mason began attending Burning Man community events in the Bay Area and slowly inserting himself into the then still small social circles surrounding the festival and its planning. In 1997, Mason executed another in his series of absurdist follies, huge assertions of self that command attention because of both idea and execution. One wonders what inner neuroses are being fed by what Mason calls his "obsessive ambition." Explains Mason, "[It's] almost dysfunctional-I find a great need to justify myself through uniquely large and excessive productions, which Burning Man certainly encourages. It's typically self-destructive and highly narcissistic in some ways-like, I'm going to sacrifice everything

around me out of some need to do that thing."

His 1997 piece was called Temporal Decomposition. It was a twelve-foot-diameter ball of ice with 200 timepieces frozen inside of it. An aluminum pipe extended from the ball, acting as the gnomon of a sundial. It was constructed on-site at Hualapai, in the August desert sun, then left to melt, releasing the timepieces. This art did slowly and deliberately what so much Burning Man art does quickly and chaotically: It used temperature to cause a change in form, an ancient alchemy. The four compass points around the sundial were marked with hollowed obelisks of ice that surrounded pipes spitting fire.

The Burning Man organization gave Mason \$4,500 to create the piece. "I wrote my first annoying Jim Mason project description, the first time I tried coopting Larry's writing style," recalls Mason. "The art theme was fertility that year, so I wrote a bullshit mythic narrative relating solar cycles to fertility. It was pitched as a solar temple thing because of the sundial aspect. That was the first Burning Man project I got funded for. I was the first anonymous person who wasn't an old friend who came to them saying I'd like to do an art project that's ambitious and costs lots of money. Back then, all the funding decisions were made in the International Café on Haight Street. That was Larry's office.

"It was actually an interesting high school physics problem, making Temporal Decomposition. I got out the books and figured out how many calories I had to remove to draw the temperature of x units of water down x number of degrees. I did all the math, and all the math turned out to be irrelevant. Well, it sort of helped me figure out what ballpark the solution existed in. And in the end I made it work by hauling an obscene amount of ice from Reno out there.

"We built a fiberglass mold with an insulating building around it, and we had a junky refrigerator unit off a diesel truck. The first big problem was making the mold. We needed something to lay the fiberglass over. We tried weather balloons, but the thing we got to work in the end was rebar and chicken wire. Then we built a building around it, a big wooden frame, then foam on the frame, then plastic on the foam and expanding foam to seal all the joints and corners, so we had a fourteen-by-fourteen-by-fourteen-foot building around the piece for insulation. Then we surrounded the building with hay and stuck the refrigerator unit inside the hay and ran it for two weeks. But I still had to haul twenty thousand pounds of ice from Reno. I found a company with old blocks sitting around that were unusably dirty and misformed, and they sold them to me cheap. I got to work breaking the ice up and putting it in through a hole in the foam and through the top of the fiberglass.

"The idea was to peel off the mold at the beginning of Burning Man and have the piece decompose over the course of the event. But of course I didn't get it finished until the next-to-last day. Like all Jim Mason's failures, it turned out more interesting than the original plan. I desperately cling to that hope.

"What ended up being interesting was that there was this thing, and no one had any idea what it was-this huge mound of hay in the middle of the event is all people saw. Then I started peeling off the hay and foam, and I hadn't slept in days and I was a screaming hysterical wreck, falling over, peeling off this fiberglass, and then it was a beautiful thing that most people saw. The way it ultimately melted didn't look that good, so I'm actually happy I didn't finish it as I planned because it would have looked horrible in a couple of days. It was better to do the unveiling the night of the Burn."

Burning Man art is inherently, and by necessity, communal. No one person could pull off stunts of this nature by himself, and there is almost never enough money involved to pay helpers. The constant maintenance needed on Mason's awful, truculent junkyard refrigerator unit came from a local machinehead who was fascinated by the idea and miraculously came up with replacement parts from Gerlacharea yards for every element of the unit that failed. Quick trips to the hardware store are impossible at Burning Man; the nearest Home Depot is a four-hour-plus round trip.

"The building of the mold and the walls was mostly girlfriend labor and good-friend labor. Hauling the ice up to the top was gutterpunk labor, and that's where the beer came in. Every time I'd get a load of ice in Reno, I'd get two cases of shitty beer. I'd park the truck, lay out the beer, and say, 'Anyone wanna help?'

"The project had a powerful effect on people. One woman saw the proposal online and came to Burning Man all the way from Florida because she saw some vision in the art, something very important to her, and she had to be a part of it. She came out and did all sorts of stuff to help."

Temporal Decomposition was not all Mason brought to Burning Man in 1997. He also brought the Vegematic of the Apocalypse.

The Veg, as everyone affectionately called it, was a long drill, mounted on a pair of rusty metal tractor wheels around six feet tall. It also sported a fire cannon, capable of spitting flame jets one hundred feet or more. While experimenting and putzing around, Mason managed to ignorantly come up with the standard old-fashioned design for military flamethrowers. The drill was a relic of the Stanford / New Guinea sculpture garden, meant to dig deep, narrow holes for sculptural supports to rest in. The machine's look of decrepit rusty decay, and the fact that it was pedal powered, combined with its unprecedented and utterly unnecessary destructive power, made it an archetypal toy for midera Burning Man, the epitome

of the oftmentioned Mad Max vibe.

Burning Man 1997 was actually the Veg's second year at Black Rock. In 1996 it showed up unannounced and inadvertently became part of the big Burn.

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