

# Playa to the People

Bringing Burning Man to the big city—and lighting a fire under SF’s art world. By Dorka Keehn

It’s 9 a.m. on May 22, and Melissa Alexander, the new executive director of the Black Rock Arts Foundation (BRAAF), can’t find even a moment to have coffee with me. “We just heard from the San Francisco Foundation that they’ve approved our grant,” she says, a bit breathless—after all, it’s only her second day on the job. “The city of Modesto wants some of our art, plus we’ve got three new installations going up this month.”

Though BRAAF isn’t yet a household name, the influence of this six-year-old foundation is evident all over SF, mainly in the form of huge public sculptures: *Passage*—Dan Das Mann and Karen Cusolito’s 30-foot-tall scrap-metal woman and child currently planted on the Embarcadero—and across town, rising up out of a grassy patch of Golden Gate Park, the mammoth purple head that is Pepe Ozan’s *Dreamer*. But BRAAF isn’t your average arts foundation; it just happens to be the offspring of what has become one of the world’s largest festivals, Burning Man. (Both *Passage* and *The Dreamer* debuted on the playa there.) Since 2001, BRAAF’s goal has been to bring Burning Man’s intense level of creativity to the world beyond—this spring, the organization hired Alexander to take it to the next level.

A wiry 45-year-old who studied fine art at De Anza College and San Francisco State, Alexander spent the 18 years before coming to BRAAF working as a project

director at the Exploratorium. “The first time I went to Burning Man, back in 2003,” she says, sitting in her office at BRAAF’s headquarters in a former warehouse near Dogpatch, “I saw that the interactive experience I was working so hard to promote at the Exploratorium was happening right there, naturally.” Which is, of course, a huge part of her new job’s appeal. “BRAAF is an incubator where they are learning in a very public way to bring this participatory artistic experience to the rest of world, particularly to communities that don’t have much access to art,” Alexander says. “BRAAF, its board, president Larry Harvey, its supporters—they all embrace the idea that art must become a more intrinsic part of civic life.”

For those increasingly rare San Franciscans between the age of 25 and 55 who haven’t yet been to Burning Man, here’s a quick primer. The annual event, which Harvey founded in 1986, now draws some 40,000 participants to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada for what may be the biggest party on the planet. What many of these revelers may not realize, though, is that Burning Man has also become a major visual-arts event. Last year, there were some 275 “official” installations, including the likes of *Uchronia* (a free-form wooden cavern, made by 90 Belgian artists,

that was 15 stories tall) and the Bay Area’s Flaming Lotus Girls’ *Serpent Mother* (a 168-foot-long coiled snake made of steel, copper and glass



(DREAMER): STEFANIE MICHEJADA

JUST TWO OF THE PIECES  
BROUGHT TO SF BY  
THE BLACK ROCK ARTS  
FOUNDATION: *PASSAGE*  
(THIS PAGE) HAS INSPIRED  
CONTROVERSY AT PIER  
14; (FAR LEFT) IN MAY,  
THE *PURPLE DREAMER*  
MATERIALIZED IN  
GOLDEN GATE PARK.



SCOTT BEALE/LAUGHING SQUID

that shot flames from its body)—and that figure doesn't include the art cars, theme camps and random examples of individual expression that abound. The art is participatory, interactive and impermanent—most of the installations are burned. All of which, added to the fact that none of these works are for sale, distinguish them from what you'll find at other art fairs.

Even more surprising, however, is that Burning Man has quietly become a heavyweight art donor. By 1999, ticket sales were bringing in enough money for the festival's organizers to hire Christine Kristen (aka LadyBee, she holds an MFA in sculpture from the Art Institute of Chicago) to curate the "official" installations and to start an arts fund to provide grants to artists who want to create large-scale works. Because of the size and elaborate nature of the projects, they offer ample opportunities for first-time artists to volunteer. "We want to reconnect people to art," explains LadyBee. "Burning Man democratizes art." For the 2007 festival, Burning Man gave out more than \$500,000 in grants, making it one of the largest private supporters of independent artists in the country. Burning Man's influence is not limited to its one week in the desert: Regional networks that function year-round have sprouted in 90 cities, from Kansas City, MO, to Melbourne, Australia. According to network coordinator Andie Grace, 25 of these groups participate in some form of arts funding—including, of course, the one in San Francisco, site of the very first Burn.

In the beginning, BRAF gave only small grants to artists, creating interactive works of art meant to serve as catalysts for community participation. In 2005, BRAF got its big break when Mayor Gavin Newsom heard about sculptor David Best from Mike Farrah, his senior advisor. (Farrah first saw Best's work when his wife, city arts commissioner Maya Draisin, brought him to Burning Man in 2004.) The 61-year-old Petaluma artist is known for the massive temples he creates out of leftover plywood cutouts gathered from a Bay Area toy factory. They're designed to be spaces in which people can grieve, remember, write thoughts and leave mementos. Though the mayor has yet to attend Burning Man himself, he was intrigued by the potential for public involvement in the art created there. With San Francisco hosting 50 mayors for World Environment Day that same year, Newsom thought that a Best temple would demonstrate both his interest in civic art and the city's commitment to recycling. The SF Arts Commission found the site—Hayes Green, the park on Octavia Boulevard where the Central Freeway once stood—and Best and his team volunteered to build the 40-foot-tall temple. For



IN 2005, FOR BRAF'S HAYES GREEN PROJECT, DAVID BEST (AND A SMALL ARMY OF VOLUNTEERS) BUILT ONE OF HIS ORNATE WOODEN TEMPLES OUT OF BIRCH PLYWOOD SCRAPS.



THE NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE BLACK ROCK ARTS FOUNDATION, MELISSA ALEXANDER, COMES FROM ANOTHER SF INSTITUTION THAT FOSTERS AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION: THE EXPLORATORIUM.

its part, BRAF tapped the Burning Man community for most of the \$20,000 needed to cover permit fees and insurance.

The temple was originally scheduled to stay up for only 12 weeks, but, as Paul Olson, president of the Hayes Valley Neighborhood Association, says, "everyone loved David's temple so much that we lobbied the city to keep it up longer"—six months in all. Locals and tourists alike came to see it, walk through it and leave messages on it. This kind of sanctioned interaction with art was new for many viewers, including the police, who almost arrested the first person to write on the temple. "He had to explain to the officers that you were *supposed* to do this," says Draisin.

*Temporary* and *interactive* are cornerstone concepts of Burning Man art, and city officials were quick to appreciate the benefits of the former, especially after past fiascos with attempts to install permanent pieces of public art. (Back in 1998, when Stanlee Gatti was president of the Arts Commission, two controversial proposals—a giant stainless-steel foot meant for the Embarcadero and an equally large peace sign set for the Panhandle—sparked a public backlash, and the sculptures were never installed.) "Temporary doesn't offend," says Farrah. "If you like it, you have it while it's there. If you don't, it's going away soon."

With the success of the temple at Hayes Green, BRAF has ramped up its collaboration with the city. This past May, for instance,

Argentina-born artist Pepe Ozan, who's lived in SF since the mid-1970s, installed his aforementioned *Dreamer* in Golden Gate Park, near the juncture of JFK Drive and 10th Avenue. BRAF has also begun working with communities outside of Burning Man to create new art. With a grant from the SF Department of the Environment and the blessings of the Neighborhood Parks Council, the foundation is launching its pilot project, ScrapEden SF, in which neighborhood groups work with artists to create pieces that are intended to inspire people to recycle.

Last month, ScrapEden installations were placed—temporarily, of course—in three parks. In the Panhandle of Golden Gate Park, a bandshell constructed of car hoods, circuit boards and plastic bottles will serve as a space for acoustic music and theatrical performances throughout the summer. For Parque Niños Unidos, in the Mission District, artist Wendy Testu, students from the Leonard R. Flynn Elementary School and the Mission Parents Group have created play spaces out of leftover building supplies, tree trimmings, bicycle tires and plastic milk cartons. And in collaboration with a group of area residents and park enthusiasts, colorful found-object mosaics were created for Juri Commons at 25th Street and Guerrero. Laura Glatstein, one of the 57 members of the self-proclaimed Juri Commoners, says that working on their installation "galvanized the neighborhood. Most people just don't get to have this type of experience."



IN NOVEMBER 2005, JUST AS BEST'S TEMPLE WAS COMING DOWN, BERKELEY ARTIST MICHAEL CHRISTIAN WAS INSTALLING THE NEXT BRAF PROJECT, *FLOCK*—MAN MORPHING INTO MANGROVE ROOTS— NEXT TO SF'S CITY HALL.

But with these opportunities come unexpected challenges. Interactivity, especially outside the utopian setting of Black Rock City, can morph into destruction. During this May's Bay to Breakers, revelers climbed on top of *The Dreamer*, damaging its nose and ears. (BRAAF was able to fund the repairs to the head, and it will stay up until the end of November.) Another Burning Man artwork, Berkeley artist Michael Christian's 42-foot-tall steel sculpture *Flock*, which was installed in City Hall's backyard in the fall of 2005 for a six-month stay, had to have barbed wire woven into its frame to keep people from climbing it.

Even experts who are fans of the art readily admit that it's not the sort of thing you'd find in most museums or galleries—because, in part, of that shift in context from desert to city. Janet Bishop, curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, has been to Burning Man several times herself; nevertheless, she says, “even work that is truly striking out at Black Rock won't necessarily resonate in an urban situation.” And René de Guzman, director of visual arts at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, has chosen not to exhibit Burning Man art because he worries, he says, about confining it in an institutional setting.

And there are those who just don't like what they see coming out of Burning Man. Of all of BRAAF's installations, *Passage* has been most vilified, though not usually on the record. Jill Manton, public art program director at the Arts

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Commission, says she's heard from members of the art world who simply think *Passage* is ugly. Larry Rinder, a respected curator and a member of the commission's Visual Arts Committee, cites “aesthetic concerns” as a reason the group did not opt to get behind the project. Instead, the Port of San Francisco approved the placement of the artwork, and then—as its popularity grew—extended the work's stay by 10 months, to October 2007.

Perhaps the greatest accolades for *Passage* and the efforts of BRAAF have come from the city of Modesto. Bob Barzan, a member of Modesto's public-art committee and the director of the Modesto Art Museum, saw the sculpture on a recent visit to San Francisco: “I just loved it.” Noting BRAAF's name on the plaque, he called the office and asked, “How do we get some of your art in Modesto?”

“This is exactly the type of community BRAAF wants to reach,” says Alexander. Modesto was just ranked by *Places Rated Almanac* as the least livable out of 373 US cities and is located in one of the poorest regions in the country. But, says Barzan, “poverty of the imagination is what Modesto suffers from the most, and that's what public art can touch.”

In spite of the short time frame—it's only been two years since David Best's temple went up on Hayes Green—BRAAF's impact on public art in the Bay Area has been remarkable. The city of San Francisco is currently looking for installations for the new Blue Greenway Art Trail, which winds from AT&T Park to the southern border of the city's waterfront, and the \$15,000 grant from the SF Foundation will fund a tool kit for neighborhood groups in the region (and beyond) to replicate ScrapEden SF. Communities are already lining up.

The test for BRAAF and for Alexander will be to continue extending that transformative experience to individuals who have never been, and may never go, to Burning Man. “There's a different set of rules, a different mind-set out there,” says Leo Villareal, a Yale-trained, NYC-based sculptor whose light art was inspired by his first trip to Burning Man 14 years ago. “If you ask someone where they got something, 90 percent of the time they say, ‘I made it.’” It's this vernacular that BRAAF is exporting. As Alexander says, “We need to be reminded of the joy of making things, and that the act of creating art gives people the opportunity to engage in civic life and in their communities.” x