

R3 Productions presents

A film by Renea Roberts

GIFTING IT

A BURNING EMBRACE OF GIFT ECONOMY

Directed and Produced by Renea Roberts

Running Time 74 Minutes / Not Rated
In Color / English

Publicity

Renea Roberts
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What people are saying

"This is from the head and from the heart. It is a brilliant meditation on the nature of gift-giving within the culture of Burning Man. Renea Roberts has captured, in deed and word, in thoughts and in actions, what seemed unpicturable. Everyone should see this."

Larry Harvey, *Founder and Director of Burning Man*

"I saw your film in a crowded room, on a bad screen, and was barely able to hear it. Two months later it is still affecting me."

Leslie Bocskor, *Burning Man Regional Coordinator, New York City*

"You captured the true essence of the gift economy and the reason so many are drawn to Burning Man and the regional events. Thank you for your wonderful effort. As one who has not attended Burning Man (only regional) you brought an understanding that is so difficult to do in words alone. Keep up the great work."

Karen Balloun-Tewault, *Never attended Burning Man*

"I was raised a gifter, perhaps this is why Burning Man clicked with me so much. Your film helps me in explaining why I give things away, why I buy unbirthdays presents, and why my husband and I just do stuff for people, even if they are strangers."

Margaret Clayton, *Gift Culture Enthusiast*

"I have seen several other documentaries about Burning Man, and they tend to focus on the "gee whiz" aspects of the event: See the naked people! Gaze upon the freaky art! Watch the Giant Man BURN!...Well, there's a little of that, it's unavoidable at Burning Man, and also a lot of fun, but as anyone who has been can attest, that kind of focus leaves out the main reason the event is so compelling: the openness, the connection with others, and the function of the gift, of course. Great images + good words + beautiful music + beatific ideas = GO SEE THIS FILM."

Juan Walker, *Burning Man Regional Coordinator, Houston*

SYNOPSIS

GIFTING IT is a meditative piece exploring how a host of social elements are affected within an experimental community that embraces a gift-giving culture. The main focus is the annual Burning Man festival that takes place in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada at the end of August. Most gift economies are comprised of small groups of people and for this reason the study of the topic is mainly found in the field of anthropology. Burning Man allows a unique opportunity to witness the fruits of a gift giving culture as they happen within a certain time and space (One set far apart from our increasingly commodified modern world). Commodities aren't abundant in a gift economy because goods and services flow as a function of gift exchange rather than as transactions of buying and selling. GIFTING IT suggests that this altered reality may have benefits that extend far beyond the festival boundaries.

The Burning Man festival dates back to 1986 when Larry Harvey set out to burn a figure at Baker Beach in San Francisco. At that burning, strangers met, shared songs and stories, and, when it ended, agreed to reconvene the following year. By 1990 the crowd attending the annual burn had grown and organizers decided to move the gathering to the Nevada desert. As the number of participants increased, so did the participation –art, costumes, community services, theme camps, organization, and media attention. The only thing that didn't increase was commerce. While participants do pay an admission fee – which offsets administration expenses and the fee charged by the federal Bureau of Land Management to use the land – organizers prohibit vending and have rejected offers of sponsorship. The novelty and lure of self expression and self-reliance in a forbidding environment has resulted in attendance growing to more than 26,000 in 2001.

The event's emphasis on gift giving, community and self-expression has inspired participants to create similar events across the United States and even around the world. GIFTING IT touches on how these regional groups have taken their desert experience and built creative communities at home.

About the Music

Much of the music in GIFTING IT was either performed at Burning Man, the regional events or was gifted to the producer by the artists. Every musician who has contributed to this film has ties to the Burning Man community.

Lost at Last, Maui, Hawaii, is at the forefront of a new genre of world music that taps into the ancient wisdom of spiritual traditions, blending Sufi, Vedic Indian, Afro-Mediterranean, Gypsy, Native American music with trance, rock, funk and folk stylings.

Moe's Kitchen, San Francisco, is a 10-piece band that adds a good dose of melodic funk and cool grooves – somewhat jazzy with sly lyrics.

Dave's Not Here, Austin, Texas, is a self-proclaimed band of Super Freaks dedicated to fighting the evils of boredom, corruption and lame music while drinking lots of beer and entertaining fans with their unique brand of protofunk.

Suzanne Sterling, San Rafael, California, creates a blend of devotional music, mixing Middle Eastern and Indian influences with a strong Celtic background and sensibility.

Credits

Director.....Renea Roberts

Producer.....Renea Roberts

Editor.....Renea Roberts

Camera.....Renea Roberts, Mathew Crimmins,
Probir Das, Blaze Nash

Additional
Footage.....Shawn Cunningham

Still photography
featured by.....Douglas Dibella, Neil K,
Patrick Roddie, Quito Banogon,
Stewart Harvey

Additional
photography by.....Christopher Schardt, Dave Marr, Frank Michaux IV,
Jay Kravitz, John Mitchell, Mark D. Klein, Sean Ryan,
Niles Harrison, Tim Timmermans, Thom van Os, DzM,
Heather Gallagher, George Post, Charles C. Benton,
Bobby G, Rob Carlson, Blue Caldwell, Aspen Moon,
Shelley Stallings, Carolyn Stallings

Graphic design.....Heather Hazel

Website.....Heather Hazel

DVD Menu design.....Eric Wayne Key

Cover Images
photographed by.....Quito Banogon

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I first heard about Burning Man from a Wired Magazine article when I was finishing graduate school in Atlanta in 1998. I was completing a degree in community psychology and was interested in exploring the idea of alternative communities.

I'd been working in technology for a large hospitality corporation and once I completed my degree, I sold my house, bought a recreational vehicle and began to drive cross-country, doing contract work to make ends meet. I wanted to fulfill my dream – making documentaries that addressed community and socially complex subjects while spending more time close to nature.

I explored different ideas for documentary subjects and began shooting footage and learning to work with the camera. In August of 1999 two dear friends and I decided we'd go check out the festival in the desert. We drove for 20 hours straight to make it to the event and only had three days on the playa. We were blown away – the creativity was overwhelming. It was difficult to walk four steps without sensory overload. I carried a camera but never took a single picture. And it's funny - one of the things that moved me the most was a black and white Polaroid that a neighboring camper gave me as a gift. A photo of me and my two friends. I still have it on my refrigerator.

Because my time there was so short, I didn't make a lot of connections with other participants. But I saw enough to know that something was quite different, I just didn't know what it was. It was unlike anything I had studied in graduate school and I found that I couldn't quite shake the experience.

I have attended other alternative events, like the Rainbow Gathering, but none had the level of expression, freedom, creativity, and community that I glimpsed at Burning Man. I watched other documentaries on the festival and felt none addressed the aspect which peaked my interest. As Burning Man 2000 approached, I found it hard to ignore the internal challenge of "documenting" this community and exploring what the foundations were that made it so unique.

I sent a proposal to Burning Man, explaining my desire to make a film that focused on the community aspects of the event, looking for patterns of contributions, and to explore what I considered then to be the barter system. After conversations with organizers, I broadened my focus to include researching what might be considered a gift economy.

Although I did not have a film studies degree, I had taken several electives in film during graduate school and I was confident that my background in community psychology would guide me in this type of research, largely because it encourages an informant-based approach. Given this, I didn't prepare a storyboard or script for the documentary. I did think about what questions I

wanted to ask and I was eager for the story to tell itself. I knew I would ask informants about community, expression, and gifting, but I didn't know what I would find or what patterns would emerge.

From the moment I arrived in the desert, there was an unending series of acts of gifting. Some I caught on camera, others I did not. Everywhere I turned some sort of gifting was taking place, and I began to see a thread between community and the act of gifting.

My challenge was to then head back with my footage to see what unfolded in the research. At this point I wasn't sure if what I had would make for a compelling film. I returned to the RV and began logging and studying the footage. I also re-read Lewis Hyde's book, "The Gift: Imagination and The Erotic Life of Property". That was key. Doing this helped me in becoming more analytical when reviewing the footage. A pattern emerged suggesting that a strong part of the community resulted from the absence of commercialism.

I still had questions about the validity of Burning Man being a true gift economy. It was unique in that some aspects were similar to traditional gift economies and some were very different. There was also the issue of time and space – did Burning Man qualify as a gift economy if it existed outside of society and only for a brief period of time? My original focus was to document this sense of community and gift economy that existed at this desert festival. But having decided to move the RV to the San Francisco Bay Area while working on the documentary, I couldn't help but witness a sense of community and support for personal creativity that extended beyond the desert boundaries, both on a professional and personal level.

I decided it was time to check out a regional festival (inspired by Burning Man) and see if it also supported the same ethics of gift exchange and community. So I booked a ticket to go to Austin, Texas, in late May. Before departing for my trip, I met Lewis Hyde at a happy hour gathering concluding a two-week course he had taught at the San Francisco Academy of Art. We talked for hours. He was gracious enough to spend time with me discussing how there can be many types of gift exchange communities and that Burning Man seemed to fall into more of a liminal category than a traditional one. That's when I realized a formal sit-down interview on camera with Hyde, discussing gifting concepts, was crucial to the film.

We did the interview on a Wednesday and Thursday morning I flew to Burning Flipside, the regional burn event in Austin, Texas. Unsure how the 600 participants at Flipside would react to my video camera, I gradually immersed myself into the community. As the word got around about my project, people began approaching me and sharing their stories about how gifting had affected them and how they felt about participating in a regional event.

When I returned home, I dove into editing. It was clear that I wouldn't be finished before Burning Man 2001. Because I'd focused on interviews the first year, I realized I hadn't captured enough footage of the art and music that permeate the event. I decided to shoot again at the 2001 festival. My focus would be to get more visuals of gifting in action. I also decided to incorporate views of the event through the eyes of others. I contacted photographers to see whether they'd be willing to donate images or footage that would help relay the story and the visual of a gift. Many were wary at first, concerned about how the event would be portrayed and protective of it being used for a big commercial type venture. Once I explained my project, almost everyone agreed to contribute. I had also been gifted music and I soon got permission to incorporate it into the film.

As the editing process began to come to an end, it became obvious to me that GIFTING IT needed to be a documentary that people could "read between the frames" – pointing to something more than just what the camera can relay. It needed to go deep enough to touch the often indescribable feelings that so many participants have expressed, but at the same time address the subject such that non-burners could understand and appreciate it – and come to their own conclusions. I know that it has struck a chord with burners – I receive emails almost daily. But I've also found that non-burners are able to draw from it as well. So I like to think that it has something for everyone.

In hindsight, I find it funny that one of my greatest concerns in heading out to the desert to document community, expression and the elements of gift economy, was that no one was going to know what I meant if I asked them about gift economy. I don't think I had to explain it once during that first year filming. In contrast, when I mention my project to people who are unfamiliar with the event, I consistently find myself having to explain the concept and then work through peoples' preconceived notions and confusion with barter, as well as trying to relay just how magical a gift can be. And, of course, their resistance to believe that it really was...well, real.

FEATURED PARTICIPANTS

Peter Hudson
Charles Smith
Syd Klinge
Michael BlueJay
Jeff Leifer
Faddah "Steve" Wolf
Albert Kaufman
Townzen Stoyls
Ted Simpson
Peter Isaacson
Dena Isaacson
Larry Harvey
Michael Michael
Steve Wolf
Lee Gilmore
Peter Hudson
Peter Isaacson
Dena Isaacson
Ted Simpson
Jeff Leifer
Michael Bluejay
April Hayden
Patrick Roddie
Chris Mitchell
Joy Hughes
Norman Major III
Mike Robinson
Dan Das Mann

Svein "Slim" Sirnes
Lord Huckleberry
Fizban the Fabulous
Brock Hanson
Al Barney
Amy M. Pecis
Townzen Soltys
Wayne Mack
Simran Gleason
Marie Gers
Randy Bohlender
Kyle Wade
Tim Schehl
Tim Nichols
Aaron Flirus
Joannaa Zwanziger
Scott Schurman
Marin Bross
Jason Bross
Penny Martin Bross
Joshua Bardt
Judi Hinkle
David Smith
Matthew Freedman
Rebecca Lippert
Keith Blei
Gary Montgomery

Kara Blanc
Alex Zaphiris
Halcyon Sytn
Gregory MacNicol
Richard Easterling
William Sappington
Austin Richards
Noel Keen
Christopher
Gutierrez
DzM
Jennifer Stewart
Karli Smith
George Bulterman
Reese Harrell
Gene Ginzburg
Alexandra D'Amaro
Scott Jacobson
James Campbell
Shannen Noark
Bob Noark
Phil Hollenbeck
Beth and Keegan
Lindsay
Fiona Essa
George Paap

ABOUT THE MAIN INTERVIEWEES

Larry Harvey

Born in 1948, Larry Harvey grew up on a small farm on the outskirts of Portland, Oregon. In the late 1970's he moved to San Francisco, and soon discovered the city's thriving underground art scene. In 1986 he founded Burning Man at a local beach, and has guided its progress ever since. Larry is currently executive director of the Project. He serves as chairman of Burning Man's senior staff and Black Rock City LLC, its executive committee. He also co-chairs the organization's Art Department, scripts and co-curates Burning Man's annual art theme, and collaborates with artists in creating aspects of the art theme and the design of Black Rock City. As spokesperson for Burning Man, he is frequently interviewed by reporters, and he has lectured on subjects as diverse as art, religion, civic planning and the rise of cyber-culture in the era of the Internet. Larry is also a political planner. He supervises the organization's lobbying efforts and frequently attends meetings with state, county and federal agencies.

Lewis Hyde

Lewis Hyde was born in Boston in 1945 and educated at the universities of Minnesota and Iowa. His much reprinted essay "Alcohol and Poetry: John Berryman and the Booze Talking" (1975) grew out of his experience as an alcoholism counselor. He has also worked as an electrician, teacher and carpenter to support himself while writing. His edition of the selected poems of the Nobel Prize-winning Spanish writer Vicente Aleixandre, "A Longing for the Light," was published in 1979. Hyde has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Massachusetts Council on the Arts. His poetry and essays have appeared in a number of journals, including the Kenyon Review, the American Poetry Review, the Paris Review and the Nation. He lives in Watertown, Massachusetts, with his family. Hyde's book, "Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property" was published in 1983. The gift economy is central to the Burning Man philosophy.

Michael Michael

Michael Michael (aka Danger Ranger) is the legendary protector of Burning Man. In 1992 he founded the Black Rock Rangers, an institution patterned on the Texas Rangers and their historic role as guardians of a dispersed frontier society. He joined the Project in 1990 and he oversees the security and survival of the Burning Man community. He also created the first Burning Man mailing list/data base, produced the first issue of the Black Rock Gazette, established the Burning Man Archive, and drove the first art car to the Black Rock Desert. Throughout the year, M2 lends his guidance and wisdom to navigate Burning Man into the future. His official title is Director of Genetic Programming and he performs his best work at 3 a.m.

Lee Gilmore

Lee Gilmore is completing a Ph.D. in Religious Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. A participant in the Burning Man Festival since 1996, she began formally researching the event after witnessing firsthand the powerful and far reaching transformations the festival had on members of her community and her own life. Ms. Gilmore also works as a Project Manager for The Regeneration Project, a non-profit organization dedicated to increasing environmental responsibility in the faith community. She and her husband Ron Meiners, an online community developer, make their home in Oakland, California.

Randy Bohlender

Born and raised in rural North Dakota, Randy Bohlender earned a degree in Biblical Studies from a small college in southwest Missouri. He and his wife, Kelsey, returned to North Dakota as houseparents at a troubled boys' home and then moved in Tennessee to serve on the staff of a growing church. In 1998, they relocated to Cincinnati, Ohio to develop a community of young adults seeking to understand and live out the principles taught by Jesus. Currently, he teaches various groups on the servant-nature of Jesus and explores new ways to make the message of Jesus understandable to people who may not be familiar with it. His favorite Burning Man is John the Baptist. He and Kelsey have three handsome sons, Jackson, Grayson and Zion. Randy enjoys interacting with others who seek truth, and can be reached at bohlender@cincyvineyard.com.

Peter Hudson

Peter Hudson has been working in film and stagecraft for the past 15 years, and considers himself a perpetual dabbler. In his spare time he enjoys finding new ways to express himself. He is currently working on making an animated version of his 2000 Burning Man playa swimmers.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

Renea Roberts was born and raised in Toccoa, Georgia. She received her Bachelor's degree with honors in Business from Florida State University and entered the corporate world of Holiday Inn Worldwide (now Six Continents Hotels) where she designed and implemented training programs and assisted in the design, rollout and quality assurance phases for system-based applications designed to forecast and optimize revenue for individual hotels. Not quite fulfilled with the job, she enrolled in Georgia State University as a candidate for the doctoral program in Community Psychology. She focused electives and her thesis in the areas of film and anthropology. While completing her master's, she took time to internship at New Dominion Pictures researching stories for The New Detectives and Daring Capers that are broadcast on The Discovery Channel. Her interest in documentaries grew and once she completed her master's she set out to explore unique communities and social aspects for filming. GIFTING IT is her first feature length documentary.

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