

# BURNING MAN ART ON FIRE

Sophia Swire, Producer

Jennifer Raiser, Associate  
Producer

Gerald Fox, Executive  
Producer

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**A Film By Gerald Fox**

**90 Minutes**

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## SYNOPSIS

An inspirational insight into the spectacular art at the center of this annual celebration, BURNING MAN: ART ON FIRE follows the unpredictable journey of the artists who defy reason to bring their massive installations and sculptures to the punishing Nevada desert. Filmed just after Burning Man's legendary founder suddenly died, the community of artists is challenged by impossible timing and blinding dust storms. This richly cinematic, multi-character narrative unfolds over months as they imagine, build and ultimately burn the extraordinary main structures in this temporary city of dreams...a poignant and uplifting feel-good movie!



## ABOUT THE FILM

The Burning Man event pops up in the barren Black Rock Desert, Nevada, for one week each August. 75,000 'Burners' – young and old, hippie and techie, ascetic and luxuriant – all converge on seven square miles of arid landscape to create the craziest, wildest, most avant-garde celebration of radical self-expression on the planet. They express their creativity in the form of costumes, theme camps, art cars, and the largest array of large-scale participatory art in the world.

There's no money, electricity, or running water; there are no trash cans or permanent structures. Participants bring everything they need to sleep, eat, survive, and celebrate in extreme desert conditions. They also bring costumes, gifts, music, and experiences to delight their fellow Burners – the 'program' is entirely comprised of creative activities provided by participants themselves. As this film will reveal, Burning Man has also become an international destination for big art, big ideas, and big experiences. There are over 400 pieces of large-scale sculpture to discover and appreciate. For one week a year Burning Man is the largest art gallery in the world. Then it's all packed up, leaving not a trace.

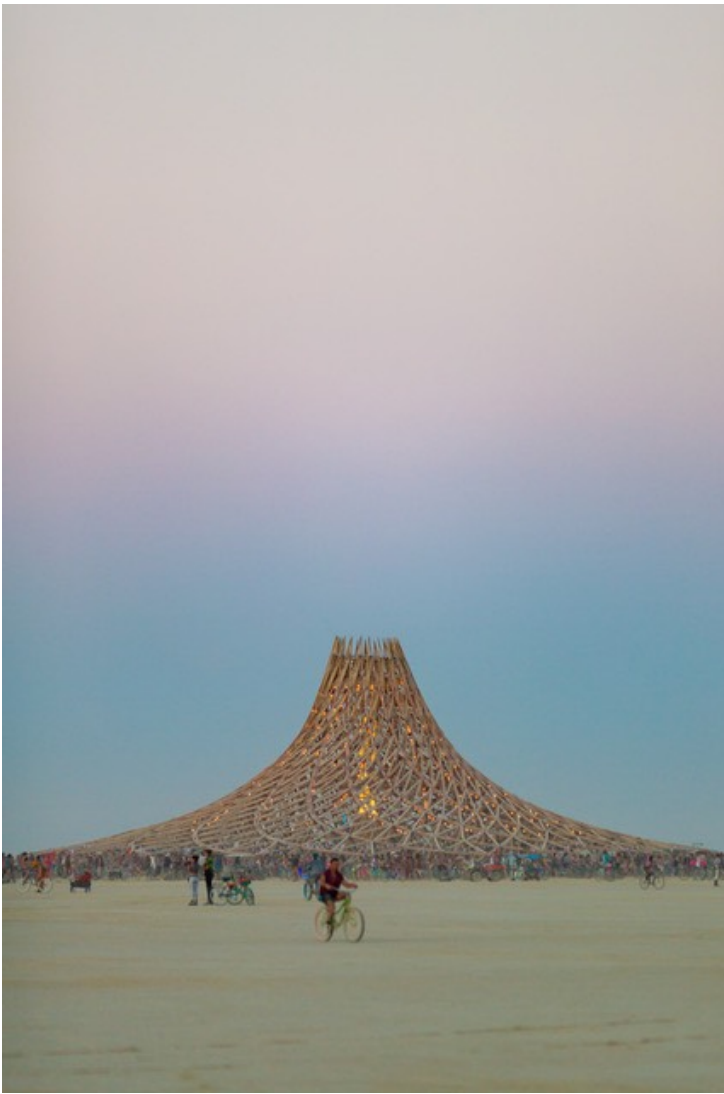
Since the inception of Burning Man in 1986, more and more makers and artists, both professional and aspiring, have brought their most creative pieces to Black Rock City. They express their wildest ideas in the form of giant sculptures: great wooden towers, monumental human forms, computer-controlled light and sound installations, and many pieces that use fire as a medium. Anyone can bring art, so long as it is interactive in some way. Art is often built by collectives, or teams of volunteers who participate in crafting, installing, and funding. There is no curatorial judgement, no gallery or museum sponsorship, and nothing is for sale. The installations must be able to withstand brutal environmental conditions, up to 80mph winds, and extreme heat and cold temperatures. Some are deliberately burned as a final expression of the artists' purpose.



Directed by BAFTA and Grierson award-winning arts film director, Gerald Fox, *Burning Man: Art on Fire* is a 90 minute feature-length documentary following the high-risk, unpredictable journeys of the major artists of the Burning Man as they build and deliver their monumental works in the wake of the passing of the inspirational founder, **Larry Harvey**. The main characters are London-based, French architect and visionary, **Arthur Mamou-Mani**, San Francisco-based Scottish Man-Base artist, **Andrew Johnstone** and longstanding American "Burner" artists, **Kate Raudenbush**, **Dana Albany**, **Peter Hazel** and **Flash Hopkins**. Shot in an intimate, handheld, fly-on-the-wall fashion, the narrative unfolds through the artists' eyes and voices. They battle and eventually overcome insufficient resources, a hostile dusty environment, insane time pressures and sheer exhaustion. The film follows the extreme highs and lows of their journeys on the "playa" every step of the way until the fiery end, interweaving these different narratives in a free-flowing portrait of the energy, creativity and dynamism that goes into this annual celebration of art.



The film begins with beautiful aerial images of the empty Black Rock Desert interwoven with spectacular shots of the same desert mid-event, full of light and colour. It cuts to the Temple builders who are arriving in the desert to start the build with an emotional flag planting ceremony. We meet the French architect Arthur Mamou-Mani in his London office some months before the event. He has been selected to design and build Burning Man's Temple for 2018, named "*Galaxia*." Arthur is attempting to achieve the impossible: constructing a vast cathedral in one of the most inhospitable places on the planet, in just 3 short weeks. The journey will push him to the very edge of his abilities as an architect and as a leader. If he and his 170 volunteers can build the temple on time, he will marry his fiancé Sandy here. We meet larger-than-life Flash Hopkins early on the Playa. One of the original Burners from the early days with founder Larry Harvey, he provides a dose of irreverent humor even as he reveals Burning Man's deepest truths. He introduces us to his partner Dana Albany, who brings her sculpture to the playa, and his special-needs adoptive son, Tommy. Tommy unexpectedly dies during the event, and is movingly commemorated by Flash, Dana, and Andrew in the Temple, towards the end of the film.



We are introduced to a range of colourful artists as they arrive to assemble their monumental sculptures. **Peter Hazel** is attempting to re-create an enormous jellyfish sculpture, which failed the previous year. **Christian Ristow** is building a Hindu-style robot deity. **Shane Evans** is erecting two fire-breathing giants including a 28 feet tall recycled Robot Resurrection. We circle back to sculptor **Kate Raudenbush**, as she installs a sculpture in memory of **Larry Harvey**. She discusses the growth of Burning Man in the context of contemporary art in America.

Studio Drift fulfills Larry Harvey's dying wish of a 1000-strong drone display with Franchise Freedom, which explores the boundaries of technology, art and nature. Masterful British writer, **Geoff Dyer** reflects on the originality and spirituality of the art and architecture of Black Rock City. Author and Burning Man art expert, **Jennifer Raiser**, introduces us to the most coveted artworks. We get a taste of Burning Man principles from the organization's CEO **Marian Goodell**, and learn about the creative process from **Nora Atkinson**, curator of the Burning Man exhibit at the Smithsonian.

The film employs the full panoply of cinematic tools to bring alive the visual intensity and surreal qualities of this event: slow motion photography, time lapse

sequences, drone imagery, handheld photography, floating gimbal images, night vision shots, different filters which enhance the dust-layered qualities of the desert are used to create a dreamlike vision and feel. We film the empty desert prior to the build, the build itself, the week-long spectacular event, the majestic burning of the Man and Temple, the embers and the ashes. We close with film with drone footage of the vast, empty desert that has been cleansed of all trace of the city that rose just a few weeks prior. The stunningly evocative musical soundtrack combining haunting electronic, instrumental and vocal textures is by the brilliant, innovative composer, musician and longtime Burner, HÄANA.

## UNIQUE ACCESS

Burning Man is notoriously difficult to access for all forms of media, particularly television. The founders and executives fiercely guard film rights and use of the Burning Man name, and few films have been made over the past 32 years of the event. Most have focused on the transformational journeys of Burning Man 'virgins' over the course of the week. This film, which has Burning Man approval, tells a deeper story of art and the artists at Burning Man, with unique access to behind-the-scenes action. Our documentary film proposal had a letter of support for the film-makers from the CEO of Burning Man, which is unprecedented.

## DIRECTORS STATEMENT

My directorial ambition for Art on Fire was to create an intimate, but cinematic film which interweaves the different stories of the central characters, as they build their art in the desert. To give greater depth, understanding and context to the artists, I cut back to them preparing for the build in their workshops, discussing art with Larry Harvey, or attending memorial services after he died.



I very much admire the work of the director, Robert Altman. So much so, I had made a documentary about him. I felt that, by continually intercutting between the characters in the style of Altman's *Short Cuts*, I could build a multi-faceted portrait of a place and community. Intertwining the storylines and narratives of this tightly-knit group of creatives who collaborate on both an artistic and personal level, I hoped to bring the relationships to the fore.

Over a period of the year in the edit, I worked with six different editors of different ages, genders, backgrounds and experience. I tried to assemble the material to convey what it takes to build works of art in these harsh conditions. I also tried to inform viewers about the burgeoning Burning Man art movement, which has become a rich new touchstone in contemporary American art.

My other directorial aim was to create a poetic vision of Burning Man. As one who had never experienced it before, my vision of this famous event was fresh and unencumbered. I wanted to be objective about the characters, the event and the art on display. As filming progressed, I realised that the event had a stunning, surreal, beauty and I became equally determined to bring this to the film. I felt this was a unique opportunity to express my deep passion for the work of visionary, dreamlike, directors such as Federico Fellini, Rene Clair, Luis Bunuel, and Gaspar Noe.

The oneiric, disorientating montages of bizarre, colourful imagery, invite viewers on a sensorial journey, as if they are experiencing the Burning Man event, themselves. Dynamically edited sequences use dramatic slow motion and hyper/time-lapse photography, moving images shot from drones, set to Burning Man music. Travelling through these dreamlike environments, viewers can experience Burning Man, almost physiologically.

The sequences aim to enhance the emotional journey of the film, climaxing with the dramatic, visually stunning burning of the Man and Temple, at the close of the film. I aim to bring the art of Burning Man alive, in a visceral, stunning, immersive way, to share the power of the art and to capture the soul of this extraordinary event and its creators.

The film was probably the most challenging I have ever made, given the constraints of time, resources, and the hostile working conditions. What we managed to pull off, is nothing short of a miracle. And it is thanks to the artists and volunteers - and of course to the indefatigable efforts of my colleagues, who worked day and night, through dust-storms and gale-force winds, to bring you this film.



## THE PRODUCTION TEAM

Director: Gerald Fox  
Producer: Sophia Swire  
Associate Producer: Jennifer Raiser  
Director of Photography: Jonathan Clark  
Music: HÄANA

## KEY BIOGRAPHIES

### Gerald Fox - Director



Gerald "Gerry" Fox is a leading British filmmaker and artist who has won major awards throughout his career for his films about the world's leading contemporary artists including Gilbert and George, Claes Oldenburg, Christian Boltanski, Marc Quinn, Gerhard Richter, Robert Frank, Bill Viola, Emir Kusturica, Annie Lennox, John Boorman and Cildo Meireles. His awards include the BAFTA, The Royal Television Society Best Arts Film, The Grierson Best Arts Documentary, The Grand Prize at The Festival of Films on Art in Montreal and The Prix Italia. All these films were shown nationally in the UK on ITV's longstanding

arts series, The South Bank Show and internationally on public and cable television, and in major film festivals and cinemas. His film "Children of the Dump" (2004) for Channel 4 about young photographers living in poverty in Guatemala City won a Gold Hugo at The Chicago Film Festival and Best Film (Adult and Children's Jury) at the Chicago International Children's Film Festival. His feature documentary, "The Fundamental Gilbert and George" (1996), which premiered as the opening film of the inaugural BFI Film Festival before being shown on ITV in two parts, won a BAFTA, the Royal Television Society Award for Best Arts Film and Grand Prize at The International Festival of Films on Art in Montreal. His film "Leaving Home Coming Home: A Portrait of Robert Frank" (2004) premiered at The Rotterdam Film Festival and Tribeca in New York and Viennale in Vienna and then won the prestigious Grierson Best Arts Documentary, the Royal Television Society Award and Grand Prize at the International Festival of Films on Art in Montreal where he was honoured in 2014 with a full retrospective of his arts films. His first dramatic feature "Mother's Milk" won eight awards including Best Film and Director at the Monaco International Film Festival, 2013. His film "Marc Quinn Making Waves" was selected for The London Film Festival (2014) before enjoying a successful theatrical release across the UK and critical acclaim in The Guardian, Sight and Sound and many other publications. Fox is also a respected film and video artist in his own right with a new three screen work to be premiered at Edinburgh International Festival (2017) and two works to feature in a major contemporary show at New Art Gallery Walsall in 2017. He has recently completed "Bill Viola, The Road to St Paul's", a film about Bill Viola made over twelve years which follows the making of a permanent two-part video installation in St Paul's Cathedral. The film has played in prestigious film festivals and arts events all around the world before its theatrical cinema release and broadcast on BBC One Imagine. Gerald's last film was Force of Nature Natalia, a film about leading ballerina Natalia Osipova, which was released in Curzon and Picture House Cinemas in the UK and on Sky Arts. His film on Robert Frank was recently released in cinemas all across America to critical acclaim in NY Times and LA Times. Gerald was educated at Harvard and Oxford Universities.

## **Sophia Swire - Producer**

Sophia Swire is an Impact Investor and Producer of documentary films and an award-winning social entrepreneur. Since 1990, she has produced multiple TV news features and documentaries for BBC, Channel 4, Nat Geo, among many other international TV networks. She was Assistant Producer for Eric Hebborn: Portrait of a Master Forger, a 60-minute documentary for the BBC TV arts series, Omnibus. In 1997, she produced a 1-hour film for Channel 4's Secret History series, A Bloody Partition working with Café Productions. She also produced a 90-minute feature length documentary film version, Mr Jinnah: The Making of Pakistan for the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, which toured the world as part of the South Asia Film Festival. She was Associate Producer for Smoke Rings, 52-minute investigative documentary on cigarette smuggling for BBC TV series, 'Inside Story', in 1997. She line-produced A Gypsy Emperor Travels East, a 52-minute documentary, part of the award winning series 'World of Geo' series. From 1992-1996, she produced, directed, wrote, presented and distributed short films about land-mines in Afghanistan; archery in Bhutan; the Kashmir dispute (Line of Control), wild polo and bull-racing in Pakistan; Buzkashi, taekwondo and wrestling in Afghanistan for Trans World Sports, BBCTV and international distribution. From 1990-1992 she was Assistant Producer at Triton Films and VMI Productions, where she researched a 2-part documentary for MBC, Somalia- A Paradise Lost. She graduated with a BA degree in History of Art from Manchester University.



## **Jonathan Clark - Director of Photography**

A DP of NewZealand descent, based in the SF Bay Area, Jonathan Clark has been actively involved with Burning Man for the last decade. Clients he shoots for include CNN, Adobe, Google, Vice & the SF Symphony. He shoots documentaries, narrative films and corporate videos. His style is often described as 'National Geographic'. He is also an international award-winning stills photographer.

## **Jennifer Raiser - Associate Producer**

Jennifer Raiser divides her roles as an author and management innovator. She is the author of the bestseller, Burning Man: Art on Fire, 2014/2016, Race Point Press, and lectures extensively on the significance of the Burning Man art movement, in Black Rock City and around the world. As founding Treasurer of Burning Man Project, she oversees a \$47M budget; on playa, she also volunteers with the Black Rock Rangers and Gate Departments. She is the author of In the Spirit of Napa Valley, 2015, Assouline, The Art of Being Bill: The Many Faces of Awesome, 2018, Race Point Press, two commissioned biographies, and has two books in development. She earned a BA in English Literature and an MBA, both from Harvard University.

## **HÄANA**

HÄANA is a one-woman orchestra, combining music, tech and art with Nordic/Icelandic influences set to a broken beat featuring electronica sounds, synthetic sonority and vocal textures. She studied contemporary improvisation at New England Conservatory (Boston, MA) and electronic music production at Dubspot (NYC). HAANA tours global EDM festivals, and is a guest artist at Berklee Music College in Valencia and performed at Obama's Inaugural Ball and Michael Jordan's Wedding. She has composed and scored soundtracks for feature documentaries including This Cold Life for Time, INC.



## CREDITS

Director	Gerald Fox
Producer	Sophia Swire
Executive Producer	Gerald Fox
Associate Producer	Jennifer Raiser
Director of Photography	Jonathan Clark
Music	HÄANA
Editors	Robin Whalley
	Una Burnand
	Caroline Clark
	Drew Hill
	William Winfield
	John Street
Assistant Cameraman	Philipp Cherichenko
Additional Camera	Steve Haskett
	Gerald Fox
	Pablo Levinas
	Robert Burnett
	George Krieger
	Sophia Swire
	David Hill
Time Lapse Photography	Thomas O'Brien
Drone Cinematography	Matthew Emmi
	Ryan Inskip
	Jamen Percy
	Josh Lauder
	Jonathan Clark
Sound Recordist	Lucas Cyril Plouviez
Assistant Recordist	Pablo Fierro
Colourist	Steve Lucas
Dubbing Mixer	Peter Hodges
Online Editor	Una Burnand
Additional Exec Producer	Giancarlo Canavesio



## THE ARTISTS



**Arthur Mamou-mani**



**Andrew Johnstone**



**Dana Albany**



**Peter Hazel**



**Shane Evans**



**Kate Raudenbush**