September 25, 1990

The accompanying photographs document my recent work in the desert. The giant figure is assembled from component parts in a supine position. The ends of its legs are placed in a pair of rotating metal shoes which are connected to metal reinforced anchors. A steel jib also connects to these anchors; positioned in front of the figure, it acts as an elementary lever to assist in lifting the figure to a standing posture. A rope attaching to the mid-point of the spine is laid over the jib. The audience then pulls Burning Man upright. Erected, he stands approximately four stories tall.

Burning Man is an event recurring rhythmically in time. This years performance occured on September 2 in the Black Rock Desert near Gelach, Nevada and was done with permission from Bud C. Cribley, Area Manager, Winnemucha District, of the Bureau of Land Managment. During the last four years we have displayed the figure previous to its destruction. This years Burning Man was erected for display at Baker Beach in San Francisco with cooperation from the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

In 1991, for our preview showing, we propose to sheath the figure in neon and mount it on a barge in San Francisco Bay. The sculpture will be raised by means of an on-board motorized winch and secured in place with metal cable. Any danger of fire is virtually non-existant. The wooden members which comprise the structure are fashioned from kiln-dried lumber (low in sap content), and they are widely spaced. It will be displayed devoid of those flamables which, inserted within the interior structrure, allow it to burn.

My design for the Man has been tested on computer models and has withstood near gale force winds in the desert. Its structure is extremely stable and our crew has several years experience. We have never had an injury. Furthermore, displayed off-shore, it will be possible to completely eliminate any hazard to the public or neighboring property. A maximum of four or five crew members are required to be nearby during the erection phase, which is completely controlled.

My intention is to transpose Burning Man's prodigious scale against a vastly larger cosmic scale. I wish, among other things, to call attention to the operation of great natural forces in our lives. I think displaying Burning Man, huge and luminous, flanked by buildings yet supported by the sea, will convey the felt force of myth.

Lastly, as part of this installation, we will show a broadcast quality video documentary, filmed in the Black Rock Desert, which is currently in production. David Bolt, Executive Director of the Bay Area Video Coalition, has agreed to donate the equipment we'll need for this purpose. We hope to schedule this event near the time of the Summer Solstice, sometime toward the end of June, 1991.

Larry Harvey
Creative Director
Burning Man Project

"One needs to be accepted and mirrored— there needs to be a gleam in some mother's eye which says it is good you are here and I acknowledge you being here and I am uplifted by your presence. There is also another need; to have somebody strong and knowledgeable and calm with whom I can temporarily merge, who will lift me when I am upset. Originally, that is an actual uplifting of the baby by the mother; later that becomes an uplifting feeling of looking at a great man or woman and enjoying him or her, or a great idea being uplifting, or a wonderful piece of music. This is extremely important. And when I talk about a cultural self object, which is the replica of the culture for the group self of what occurs in individual development, I think these two basic needs are also present..."

Heinz Kohut
— Self Psychology and the Humanities

Religions originate in mystical visions— instants of revealed truth which transcend rational judgement. Such moments speak to us, said William James, ".of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest.". Burning Man is neither cult nor creed. Our goal is to inspire religious experience without resort to supernatural sanctions. We are trying to recapture the concrete and immediate experience from which all religion springs; to strip spirit to its naked body.

God, it's been said, is not known, not understood; he is used. Applying this principle, we've made Burning Man a working model of spirit as it is literally seated in our bodies. His groin burns blue as flames ascend his spine. His arms, outstretched, reach upward and the fire, flaring red about the heart, ignites a fuse inside his head. He is a picture of sublimation; spirit as a passage upward and a reaching out, an image of the way our prompting instincts, dark and rooted, are transformed into ideals.

The overall design of Burning Man derives from the technology of home construction. His finished form is like the pristine plan of a building. The human self, this metaphor suggests, performs an analogous function. Burning Man is a regression; a returning to the time we were first formed, ourselves constructed, as we clambered on a parent's body or craved witness in their eyes. Building Burning Man we build ourselves.

And yet these metaphors, however compelling, do not reach the heart of the matter; for in making Burning Man we're making myth. Myths are stories that we tell ourselves about who we are; about how we belong to the world, ourselves, and each other. A living myth is a genetic code, an active instruction for the assembly of self— not merely a symbol of certain ideas, but a knowledge conveyed through initiation. It is only in the press of action and the presence of the Man himself that we're uplifted.

For Burning Man, whatever else he may be, is an uplifting experience; a reassurance that our energies are instinct with a power that exceeds our strength as we exceed the strength of children, a vision of ourselves reflected in the grandeur of the world.

We inhabit a rational age. Those myths which have so long sustained religion seem like stories we might tell to entertain our children. Orion, we're assured, is not a man who spans the sky, but a fortuitous combination of stars, and it is childish, naively egocentric, to believe otherwise. We do not, however, live, said Robert Louis Stevenson, within, "external fact, but in the dim phantasmagoric chamber of the brain, with its painted windows and its storied walls". Our most urgent motives, the passions which drive us and inform our ideals are profoundly irrational. A life merely lived upon rational grounds is a proposition without meaning, for we belong to the world of passionate attachment, of mirrors and merger, as surely as we belong to ourselves. Burning Man is an attempt to reinvent myth in our world; to guide our audience backward to that primal moment, unreasoned and immediate, when spirit itself is created.