



# Stanford Goes to Burning Man, A Series of Interviews

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## Professor Camille Utterback

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**Alexandra (Mac) Taylor:** First, can you please introduce yourself?

**Utterback:** I'm Camille Utterback, assistant professor in Art & Art History and by courtesy Computer Science.

**Taylor:** Wonderful. Thank you so much for agreeing to speak with me today. We're talking about Burning Man and its relationship to art and technology as preparation for the upcoming ArtsWest symposium *Burning Man: Art and Technology*. To do that task we're collecting

various impressions from Stanford affiliates on their Burning Man experiences by interviewing a sample of faculty, students, and alumni on their thoughts about Burning Man. To get going, how did you first hear about Burning Man?

**Utterback:** I first heard about it when I was a graduate student in New York in the late 90's. I was at the Interactive Telecommunications Program at NYU and a few folks there had started going to it, including Leo Villareal who was an adjunct professor. Leo got his start there doing complex -LED art installations and as you know we now have his Bay Bridge "Bay Lights" installation in San Francisco. I remember him talking about going to

Burning Man but it seemed rather remote and too expensive for me to go to it as a student.

**Taylor:** You heard about it there on the East Coast, but when was the first time you attended Burning Man?

**Utterback:** I've only been once and it was in 2014. So, I was already a faculty member here. I had heard a lot more about it in the intervening years since I moved to the Bay Area. Obviously, it's a gigantic happening here and a lot of my Bay Area friends had been to it. The City empties out for it so you know something special is going on. At first I was actually very resistant to going. I thought it sounded dreadful— like the idea of people dehydrating in the desert and getting high on various drugs did not seem super appealing to me. But it was through my colleague and friend Bernie Roth who's a mechanical engineering professor here who goes all the time that changed my mind. He kept saying to me: "Oh, you should come, you should come, it would be great." So, I eventually caved in and attended with his camp along with my husband who had gone in the past.

**Taylor:** What was your most memorable experience while you were there?

**Utterback:** Riding my bike in a sand storm. It was amazing— complete white out— however I wasn't afraid of smashing into something. It was just a really beautiful experience to have your vision completely obscured and then it would suddenly lift for a little bit and you would be in this very magical place and then it would vanish and you couldn't see anything again. I actually enjoyed the -sand storm, having never experienced anything like that before.

**Taylor:** Do you think hearing about it as a grad student and then going to it as a faculty member and seeing it first hand made a difference? Were you completely surprised, or was this expected in some way or was the experience just completely different from anything you'd heard of before?

**Utterback:** Well, I had heard a great deal about it long after being a grad student largely from a community of people in San Francisco who became my friends. This group was bound together by staying at the same camp every year at Burning Man. I had seen as

an observer that these people were really a coherent and cohesive support network for each other. They were there for each other like any community and I was fascinated with how this particular group of friends, though all very different and diverse, traced their community back to their camp at Burning Man. I heard all these fabled stories from this group of friends about their camp experiences and about the various art works, and I had seen a few photographs. The reality was kind of shocking to me as I had imagined that each camp was an isolated oasis far from each other. But when I arrived there, what I saw was the most incredible tent city with people packed tightly together in all the camping situations - more like a neighborhood. Also impressive was the sense of movement from all of the lights out on the playa at night that seemed to set everything in motion and illuminated as far as your eye can see. The vastness and the movement of it all was incredible to me as an artist, both visually and experientially.

**Taylor:** What was the artwork like that you saw there?

**Utterback:** The artwork at Burning Man is very community focused and most interested in what can you build with a team of people. But the scale of it is really incredible. Just the fact that these gigantic art works are assembled in such a short amount of time in a wilderness was kind of wonderful to see how people come together for collective creativity. Also, much of the art work is figurative, or designed to engage your body physically, so it brings you back to the human element.

**Taylor:** What do you think about the art of Burning Man being collected or preserved in museum settings?

**Utterback:** I saw the recent Burning Man show at the Renwick Gallery in Washington DC. They can't collect most of it because it is ritually burned or destroyed. However, it is one of the missions of art museums to hold our cultural memory. Some of the art produced at Burning Man is influential to the wider art world so it makes sense that some institution should be collecting those pieces. I believe in the early years of Burning Man photography was not allowed, so you had to be been there to experience it yourself first hand. Theoretically museums do have a role in preserving the record of the festival for posterity. I did think the art cars were the most interesting objects there because they're art in motion – both functional and fantastical. There is this whole other element of performance and theater that you have to consider. To me, it's almost more like floats in a parade. But the fact that one of those crazy vehicles could be coming at

you out of the haze of a dust storm was very dramatic and more compelling to me than the scale of the more massive static pieces.

**Taylor:** What was it like to be participant in the 10 guiding principles of shared community that typically characterized the Burning Man experience?

**Utterback:** I did have one memorable experience related to the principles. Right after arriving, I was sitting around with a bunch of my friends at our camp and some younger men came around and offered us all free breakfast burritos (which was obviously not a ploy to pick any of us up as we were all so much older!). I was actually starving, so it was super fantastic to be offered some really delicious food spontaneously at that moment. So, the idea of people gifting things to each other out of a community spirit I felt that first hand. I was very impressed with the sincerity of this act as practiced through the shared values of Burning Man.

**Taylor:** I have one last question for you. If you could sum up Burning Man in one word or perhaps even just a phrase, what would that be for you?

**Utterback:** For me the thing that would sum it up was a serendipity and suspension of time. There was very limited Wi-Fi or mobile service there, which forced me to just be in the moment. There are very few examples in everyday life that can be described as completely unscheduled and the day can just unfold and you actually have time to sit around as long as you want and talk with people and then wander off and have another experience and wander back and maybe hang out with some different people without having any set schedule. With the absence of mobile phones it became a nostalgic time to me because I didn't grow up having a phone tethered to me as a way of organizing time. The freedom and aimlessness of time was very liberating and the only distraction was the serendipity of the moment.

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