

THE ALTERNATIVE IN THE DESERT:

On the Burning Man Organization

BY KATHERINE CHEN

Each year, from the last week of August through Labor Day, the Burning Man Festival develops a vibrant city of 24,000 in the desolate environment of Nevada's Black Rock Desert. Walk along one of the temporarily installed streets pressed into the desert surface and you encounter citizens from around the world attired in fanciful costumes; "art cars" displaying fantastic forms such as a large lobster or a furry "cat bus"; and art installations demanding interaction with the audience. A forty-foot tall wooden and neon sculpture of the "Man" anchors the temporary city center for the duration of the festival until being dissolved by fire in the concluding ritual that gives the event its name.

In experiencing Black Rock City, you also notice the refreshing absence of elements present at most large-scale events: corporate sponsorship and advertising, vending based on monetary exchange (Burning Man participants must prepare their own food, shelter, and entertainment; ice and coffee are the only items sold at the event, with the proceeds benefiting the local town of Gerlach), and the clear-cut division between audience and art. Such aspects of the festival provide fodder for the popular press. From a sociological perspective, however, just how the Burning Man organization manages this unusual event and growth attracted my interest and is the subject of my dissertation work.

The original Burning Man event began in 1986 as an informal bonfire among a small group of friends who gathered on San Francisco's Baker Beach. The event's practice of burning items stems from traditional summer solstice celebrations. The official reasons for burning the "Man" and other artwork are left to individual explanation and imagination. A sociological explanation in the tradition of Émile Durkheim would focus on the community-building aspects of the ritualized burn.

These earlier events required only minimal organizational effort, but subsequent events grew in duration and number of participants. That, along with a relocation to Nevada in 1990, demanded more formal organization. Then, in 1996, accidents and an unanticipated surge in the festival population overwhelmed the event infrastructure, convincing the then-

part-time organizers to better manage the event by "professionalizing" operations. By 1999, the organization had stopped working out of private homes and had acquired its official San Francisco headquarters, where organizers could host volunteer meetings and work full-time. Through this process of maturation, the Burning Man organization, like other growing organizations, has worked to coordinate increasing scale while maintaining its mission of self-expression and active participation.

Conventional research concentrates on how an organization's environment induces the organization to adopt accepted practices and structures. For instance, American organizations universally adopt employment guidelines put forth by the government. In contrast, my dissertation provides evidence that the interaction between an organization and actors in its environment can be a two-way street. The Burning Man organization has developed and shaped relationships with environmental groups, governmental agencies, and local Nevada business and civic groups to ensure the festival's future. The organization also actively lobbies the federal government to influence legislation that might otherwise restrict the event's access to the Black Rock Desert, and it maintains strong personal and civic ties with the small towns adjacent to the event site to trouble-shoot concerns such as event traffic and clean-up. Clearly, organizations can shape and influence their environments, especially ones that create such novel "products" as the Burning Man event, where few precedents are available to provide guidelines.

The Burning Man organization also has utilized both bureaucratic and alternative structures to cope with the internal challenges of growth. Many people, particularly those associated with a group such as the Burning Man, equate bureaucratic structures with spirit-crushing banality. Yet certain bureaucratic structures—centralized databases and clear tiers of management—enable members to coordinate their work without significantly compromising the organizational mission of participation and self-expression. Conversely, alternative structures, such as encouraging



The "Burning Man" sculpture is ritually engulfed in flames at the conclusion of the 2001 Burning Man Festival in Black Rock Desert.

members to create their own organizational roles, lend flexibility. The most important alternative "structure," however, is the Burning Man group's strongly held belief in the organization's mission, which helps steer members' actions with less top-down oversight. It also seems to inspire members' contributions at a rate higher than those elicited by financial incentives.

I decided to study the Burning Man organization partly because I wanted to conduct field research into an organization in which people were actually happy to participate and where they could meet their individual non-financial needs. In contrast, most organizational research examines how organizations extract the last drop of productivity from their presumably reluctant workers.

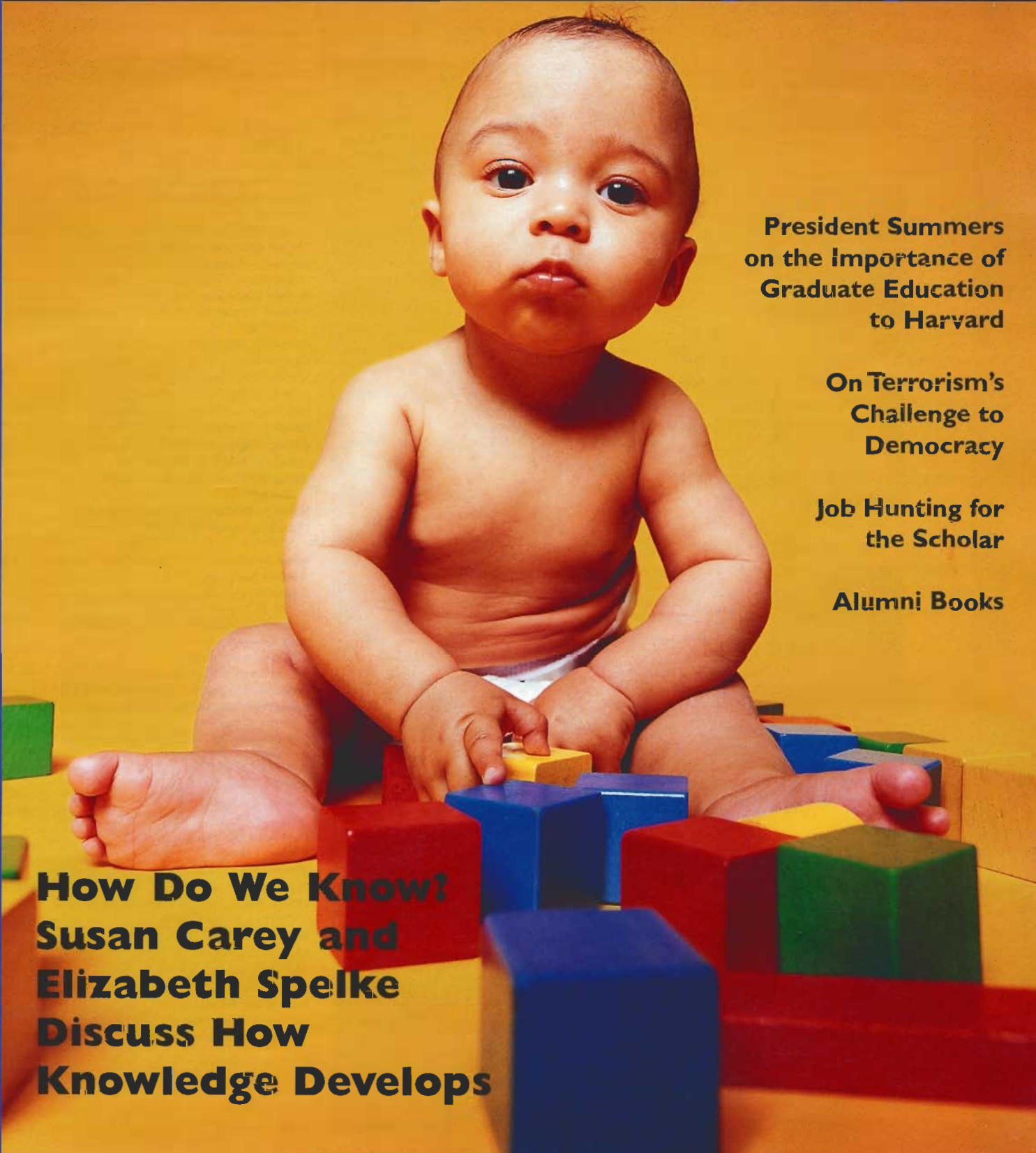
After three rounds of on-site research that included observing organizational activities from 1998 to 2001 and interviewing eighty past and present Burning Man members and organizers, I am currently analyzing my data and writing the dissertation. Throughout this process, I am often reminded of how fortunate I am to have this unique opportunity to earn a PhD by documenting and analyzing an organization that has significantly contributed to the arts scene and has facilitated a growing social movement that provides alternatives to a consumerist entertainment industry and a standardized art world. ☿

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A photograph of a baby sitting on a floor with colorful blocks. The baby is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a solid yellow color. The baby is wearing a white diaper. The floor is covered with various colored blocks (red, blue, green, yellow, orange).

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Challenge to
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