The EIF has a new membership program! One-year memberships include a year's subscription to the Rapa Nui Journal. The cost is $40 for U.S./Canada and $50 for all other countries. The price includes an interim email newsletter. Please make sure we have your current email address when you renew so that you can keep posted on all the island news. We also will provide a 10% discount on EIF purchases to any member who refers someone to us, resulting in a new membership, so please tell all your friends about us!

Some of our readers' memberships have lapsed. Your timely membership renewal will help to save us time and money. To see when your membership expires, check the date on your Rapa Nui Journal mailing label.

Student and library/institutional memberships remain at $30 (U.S./Canada) and $40 (other countries). We have several libraries that would like to receive RNJ but have limited budgets. If you would like to sponsor a library subscription, please contact us for a list of libraries and details. We appreciate your help!

We thank everyone who has kept their membership current and especially those who have given us additional donations throughout the year. People like you help us to fulfill our goal of educating the public about Easter Island and help us to carry out special projects that benefit the island and its people.

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**MOAI SIGHTINGS**

**BURNING MOAI: DRAGON DEBRIS'S EASTER ISLAND VILLAGE AND THE HEADS PROJECT AT BURNING MAN, 2002**

by Scott Nicolay

In August of 2002, Luling Ososfsky had just returned from five weeks of archaeological field school on Rapa Nui, and she was getting ready to head for the second big event of a particularly amazing summer: the Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert. She knew she was going to see some strange and wonderful sights at Burning Man. What she didn't expect to see there were moai. And she especially didn't expect to see them attached to the portable toilets. "I loved the combo of old and new," said Ososfsky, "Rano Raraku versus octopus-costumed techno pagans popping off their stilts before using the port-a-potties in the desert, after patting a moai on the nose."

This rather spectacular moai sighting was the work of Dragon Debris, an arts collective that has constructed elaborate art installations at Burning Man since 1999. In 2002, they chose Easter Island as the theme for their efforts. Burning Man itself, which may need explanation for some RNJ readers, is an unusual, by some standards outrageous, interactive art festival and celebration of pyromania and, well, lots of other things that don't always get celebrated in public elsewhere. The festival began in 1986 in San Francisco as a commemoration of the summer solstice. Artist Larry Harvey constructed an eight foot tall effigy and burned it on a local beach. Only 20 people attended that first year, but as the event (and the burning man himself, now towering 80 feet above the desert floor) grew larger, Harvey and his friends were forced to relocate to Nevada's Black Rock Desert. Now the population of Black Rock City (as the festival site is known) swells annually to more than 25,000, some of whom arrive in airplanes and helicopters. Theme camps and art installations are integral parts of the event. The Burning Man organization requires installations to be interactive, and the festival emphasizes participation over spectatorship. Each year the festival has one overall theme. Participants develop their own theme camps and installations that express their personal interpretations of the annual theme. Dragon Debris founder John Barry aptly describes the event as "the Internet come to life."

Like the festival itself, Barry started small, developing elaborate personae to go with his Halloween costumes. When he became involved with Burning Man in 1999, his individual concepts expanded into group performance art pieces. The group's projects combine the ancient with the mechanical, and along with their playfulness and a taste for over-the-top puns, they also show a strong interest in exploring religious themes. So how did Dragon Debris come up with Easter Island as the concept for their theme camp in 2002? According to Barry, the original germ of inspiration came from a group that would stage an "Easter Saturday" each year at the festival, dressing up as "church ladies" and haranguing the sinners (who are both plentiful and highly visible at the event). This got him thinking about the concept of Easter itself. His interest in ancient cultures and the tentative festival theme of "Ports of Call" (eventually changed to "The Floating World," with which the idea fit equally well), led to the original Easter Island concept. It started out as a pastiche, an installation of giant candy sculptures that would emphasize the absurdity of Europeans imposing the whole concept of Easter, with its association with rebirth, on another culture even as they were destroying it. The crew also looked at the basic question of "Why does a bunny bring eggs?", something Barry says he once had.
to try to explain to some Japanese friends at an Easter party. "The original idea over a year ago," said Barry, "was to combine Christian concepts of Easter with the images of giant stone heads, perhaps made like giant candy, peeps, and bunnies." Nonetheless, Barry did not take his task lightly. His motto, he writes, is: "anything worth doing, is worth overdoing." He began researching Easter Island, even contacting the EIF for advice. Along the way, he encountered the theories regarding the ecological catastrophe in the island's prehistory. In February 2002, he went the extra mile (and many more) and traveled to Rapa Nui for Tapati. From the start, Barry was impressed with the level of craftsmanship he saw there. "The stage set/huts, the floats, and organization were all superb!" The more Barry saw of the Rapa Nui people and learned about their history and culture, the more he began to have doubts about the original concept. "Once there, I realized I couldn't mess with the culture that way, and I had to find a more fitting way to communicate the ecological aspect." He recalls having a crisis there on the island, thinking: "I can't begin to do justice to this ... what have I done?" Then came one of those moments that changes everything. On the night of the coronation finale, the bonfire beach extravaganza, Barry turned to his companion and said, "This is soo Burning Man!" to which he replied, "No, Burning Man is so THIS!" After that, it all came together. The theatrics of Tapati, the elaborate staging, the monumental sculpture, body paint and skimpy costumes, all harnessed to an important message about conservation and survival. Barry credits Tapati with opening his eyes to the possibilities of participatory theater. Back in Los Angeles, Dragon Debris moved into action, making large *moai* replicas of papier mache. There was a problem though: how to keep the *moai* standing in the often stormy desert environment. Then came the Heads Project. The idea of using the potties started out as a bad joke, one from which Barry says he initially recoiled, but eventually, the group began to consider it seriously. "Incorporating them turned out to provide a very viable support system," said Barry, "a pre-existing stable structure onto which we could attach the heads allowing them to stand on their own. We just prayed nobody knew the part of the legend where the warring tribes knocked down all the *moai* leaving none standing." What really made the project attractive was the opportunity to make a positive contribution to the festival. There had been a problem in previous years with a small number of irresponsible people using the potties as dumpsters, which placed the festival in danger of losing its waste removal service. Although there were too many portable toilets to attach *moai* to each, it was feasible to place signs on every one of them with a message about responsible waste disposal, messages that came to be known as "poopetry." "The poopetry," said Barry, "was a humorous attempt to educate and inform. Most of the words came from the Burning Man organization. We enhanced them with pix and a bit of Rapanumism." Every portable toilet had poopetry, but the ones with the heads had substantially larger signs, and these told the full story of the ecological catastrophe on Rapa Nui and its connection with the group's project. There was also the captive audience aspect. As Barry pointed out, everybody has to use the potties, so messages on the doors would not go unnoticed. "We liked being able to combine the cautionary tale of Easter Island's ecologically disastrous decline with the poopetry's vital message of waste awareness. When we proposed the Heads Project to the Burning Man organization we realized that we could contribute to the community by getting a very important "leave no trace message to every participant." The organization approved the project and it went ahead. When "burners" visited the privies, they were greeted by signs with pictures of Ahu Akivi and Tongariki bearing messages like: "Use your Head: If it wasn't in your body, don't put it in the pottie." The project was very well-received by festival-goers, and the Burning Man Organization credited Dragon Debris with helping minimize the waste disposal problem. When it was all over, most of the *moai*, true to the spirit of the event, went up in flames. Barry did keep one which he has completely restored as a permanent object d'art, enhancing it with a new collage that tells the story of the whole project. This *moai*, along with other artifacts from Dragon Debris's first five years of Burning Man installations will appear in an art show opening on Sept. 25 at Harold's Gallery in Los Angeles.

Barry acknowledges his concern that the association of the heads with the port-a-potties would be viewed as disrespectful. "We invested a lot of meaning to the transformation of waste, dutiful uses of resources and ecological awareness;" he wrote, "things that Burning Man participants would appreciate, We just weren't sure of the reactions of the guardians of Rapa Nui heritage." Let's face it: *moai* have decorated some pretty cheesy establishments over the years. What made this project much more than an avant-garde tiki bar in the desert was the way in which Dragon Debris used the Easter Island theme to send a powerful yet playful message about sustainability and conservation. Though some may be offended, the Dragon Debris Easter Island project was deeply rooted in respect for Rapa Nui, the island and its people, and a genuine recognition of the importance of the lessons we can all learn from their history. It was a tribute, not a travesty. "The most important thing," said Barry, "is we never meant to be disrespectful to the culture in any way." Those whose would like to know (and see) more should visit the Dragon Debris web site: http://dragondebris.com, which features extensive photographic documentation of "Easter Island" and all the group's projects, including this year's Bollywood-themed extravaganza "Shiva Las Vegas." For more information about Burning Man itself: http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/.

**WHAT'S NEW IN THE PACIFIC**

**COOK ISLANDS**

POPULATION CONTINUED TO DECLINE in the Cook Islands this past year; there were unpopular political party switches by members of parliament; dengue fever; flooding; ten-year high inflation; land controversies; and immigration concerns. The once large agriculture industry slumped in earnings, although pawpaw, *nono* (or *noni*), male, and other products continued as notable exports. New challenges included a coconut moth that invaded coconut trees in Rarotonga, causing the trees to brown. The government declared a biological war on the moth, using bio-agents that are its natural enemies. However, efforts to contain it in Rarotonga seemed hopeless, and by June 2002 the moth had spread to the outer islands. The Queensland fruit bat also became a potential natural disaster that could wipe all fruit