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## Burning Man a Test for Tech Art By Declan McCullagh

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BLACK ROCK CITY, Nevada -- Win Burleson squints through a swirling Nevada dust storm and rubs grit from his laptop screen for the third time in the last minute.

"Is the network up yet?" he asks a bedraggled assortment of MIT geeks hunched over a grimy tangle of cables, video projectors, and a smoldering soldering iron.

Burleson and his colleagues are crafting a project that's an equal blend of art, technology, and -- if the high winds here at the Burning Man festival continue -- an endurance test of technology against the elements.

They plan to float up to three 16-foot, latex balloons above the dry lake bed and dangle thumb-sized infrared cameras underneath. Those and other wireless cameras held by participants roaming the counterculture event will beam images to four huge screens looming surrealistically in a cube at the north edge of this temporary city.

"We're going to accumulate as many image sources as possible," says Ted Selker, a 43-year old associate professor at MIT's Media Lab and Burning Man regular who is organizing the project.

Selker runs the Media Lab's Context Aware Computing group, which is working on creating computers built into objects such as floors, beds, and necklaces that know what's happening in the world around them. A context-aware bed, for instance, would gradually conform itself to its owner's music, lighting, and bedtime preferences.

But the rarefied atmosphere of Cambridge, Massachusetts is worlds away from the severe weather of Nevada's Black Rock Desert, where Selker and his graduate students have spent this week struggling with generator problems, a flaky Internet connection, and repeated interruptions by curious passers-by.

True to the share-freely spirit of Burning Man, however, some gawkers quickly turned into helpers: A former Internet CEO donated an Ethernet patch cable, a satellite engineer volunteered to set up the network, and a video-game programmer offered to write a Java program to display GPS signals on one of the projection screens.

The system works this way: One balloon transmits an infrared video feed, allowing nighttime recording, while another hoists a tiny Sony Vaio laptop with a built-in camera that transmits images through an 802.11 wireless network.

Sekler, a former IBM fellow who invented the finger-pointing device used in Thinkpad laptops, says he hasn't decided what video feeds to put up on his screens, and how to alter them using image-manipulating software.

"I think they're going to be playa-related," he says, referring to the desert expanse on which Burning Man attendees construct their weeklong city each year. "If we were flashing that stuff up there (we should do it) not as a slide show but as a kind of continuum."

Because Black Rock City is miles from electrical power and the glare of a metropolis, creative lighting displays have become a commonplace art form here.

On Thursday evening, some participants danced between an overhead projector and a large white screen. Most festival attendees have attached colored lights to their clothing -- or their nude bodies -- instead of using flashlights at night.

*Because of high winds, the MIT team ultimately was not able to complete their four-sided structure. Instead they beamed a movie of last year's Burning Man ceremony on two of the sides.*



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