It's like a dream. Imagine, in the empty desert, you come upon a huge wheel ringed in skeletons,and someone invites you to come pull a series of heavy ropes at its base,

so you walk to one side, where a team is waiting, and you all throw your backs into it, and you pull in turn,

and eventually, the wheel roars to life, lights begin to flicker, and the audience cheers,

and you've just activated Peter Hudson's "Charon," one of the world's largest zoetropes.

This is the farthest thing from marketable art.

It's huge, it's dangerous, it takes a dozen people to run, and it doesn't go with the sofa.

It's beautifully crafted and completely useless, and it's wonderful. You're unlikely to see works like "Charon" in the art-world headlines.  
  
These days, the buying and selling of artwork often gets more attention than the works themselves.

In the last year, a Jean-Michel Basquiat sold for 110 million dollars,

the highest price ever achieved for the work of an American artist,

and a painting by Leonardo da Vinci sold for 450 million, setting a new auction record.

Still, these are big, important artists, but still, when you look at these works and you look at the headlines,

you have to ask yourself, "Do I care about these because they move me,

or do I care about them because they're expensive and I think they're supposed to?"

In our contemporary world, it can be hard to separate those two things.

But what if we tried? What if we redefined art's value -- not by its price tag,

but by the emotional connection it creates between the artist and the audience,

or the benefits it gives our society, or the fulfillment it gives the artists themselves?

This is Nevada's Black Rock Desert, about as far as you can get from the galleries of New York and London and Hong Kong.

And here, for just about 30 years, at Burning Man, a movement has been forming that does exactly that.

Since its early anarchist years, Burning Man has grown up.

Today, it's more of an experiment in collective dreaming.

It's a year-round community, and every August, for a single week,

70,000 people power down their technology and pilgrimage out into the desert

to build an anti-consumerist society outside the bounds of their everyday lives.

The conditions are brutal. Strangers will hug you, and every year, you will swear it was better the last,

but it's still ridiculous and freeing and alive, and the art is one thing that thrives here.

So this is me on the desert playa last year with my brother, obviously hard at work.

I'd been studying the art of Burning Man for several years,

for an exhibition I curated at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery,

and what fascinates me the most isn't the quality of the work here, which is actually rather high,

it's why people come out here into the desert again and again to get their hands dirty and make in our increasingly digital age.

Because it seems like this gets to something that's essentially human.

Really, the entire encampment of Burning Man could be thought of as one giant interactive art installation driven by the participation of everyone in it.

One thing that sets this work aside from the commercial art world is that anyone who makes work can show it.

These days, around 300 art installations and countless artistic gestures go to the playa.

None of them are sold there. At the end of the week, if the works aren't burned,

artists have to cart them back out and store them. It's a tremendous labor of love.

Though there is certainly a Burning Man aesthetic, pioneered by artists like Kate Raudenbush and Michael Christian, much of the distinctive character of the work here comes from the desert itself.

Michael Christian

For a work to succeed, it has to be portable enough to make the journey,

rugged enough to withstand the wind and weather and

stimulating in daylight and darkness, and engaging without interpretation.

Encounters with monumental and intimate works here feel surreal. Scale has a tendency to fool the eyes.

What looked enormous in an artist's studio could get lost on the playa,

but there are virtually no spatial limits, so artists can dream as big as they can build.

Some pieces bowl you over by their grace and others by the sheer audacity it took to bring them here.

Burning Man's irreverent humor comes out in pieces like Rebekah Waites' "Church Trap,"

a tiny country chapel set precariously on a wooden beam, like a mousetrap, that lured participants in to find religion

it was built and burned in 2013 ... while other works, like Christopher Schardt's "Firmament," aim for the sublime.

Here, under a canopy of dancing lights set to classical music, participants could escape the thumping rave beats and chaos all around.

At night, the city swarms with mutant vehicles, the only cars allowed to roam the playa.

And if necessity is the mother of invention, here, absurdity is its father.

They zigzag from artwork to artwork like some bizarre, random public transportation system, pulsing with light and sound.

When artists stop worrying about critics and collectors and start making work for themselves, these are the kinds of marvelous toys they create.

And what's amazing is that, by and large, when people first come to Burning Man, they don't know how to make this stuff.

It's the active collaborative maker community there that makes this possible.

Collectives like Five Ton Crane come together to share skills and take on complex projects a single artist would never even attempt,

from a Gothic rocket ship that appears ready to take off at any moment to a fairytale home inside a giant boot complete with shelves full of artist-made books,

a blackbird pie in the oven and a climbable beanstalk. Skilled or unskilled, all are welcome.

In fact, part of the charm and the innovation of the work here is that so many makers aren't artists at all,

but scientists or engineers or welders or garbage collectors, and their works cross disciplinary boundaries,

from a grove of origami mushrooms that developed out of the design for a yurt

to a tree that responds to the voices and biorhythms of all those around it through 175,000 LEDs embedded in its leaves.

In museums, a typical visitor spends less than 30 seconds with a work of art,

and I often watch people wander from label to label, searching for information,

as though the entire story of a work of art could be contained in that one 80-word text.

But in the desert, there are no gatekeepers and no placards explaining the art, just natural curiosity.

You see a work on the horizon, and you ride towards it. When you arrive, you walk all around it, you touch it, you test it.

Is it sturdy enough to climb on? Will I be impaled by it?

Art becomes a place for extended interaction, and although the display might be short-lived, the experience stays with you.

Nowhere is that truer at Burning Man than at the Temple.

In 2000, David Best and Jack Haye built the first Temple, and after a member of their team was killed tragically in an accident shortly before the event, the building became a makeshift memorial.

By itself, it's a magnificent piece of architecture, but the structure is only a shell until it disappears under a thick blanket of messages.

"I miss you." "Please forgive me." "Even a broken crayon still colors."

Intimate testaments to the most universal of human experiences, the experience of loss.

The collective emotion in this place is overpowering and indescribable, before it's set afire on the last night of the event.

Every year, something compels people from all different walks of life, from all over the world, to go out into the desert and make art when there is no money in it.

The work's not always refined, it's not always viable, it's not even always good,

but it's authentic and optimistic in a way we rarely see anywhere else.

In these cynical times, it's comforting to know that we're still capable of great feats of imagination, and that when we search for connection, we come together and build cathedrals in the dust.

Forget the price tags. Forget the big names.What is art for in our contemporary world if not this? Thank you.