

How China's Most Famous Grounded Artist With A Navajo Man Thousands Of Miles Away

By Mallika Rao HuffPost Ai Weiwei Artist

The idea was to raise the profile of a small Navajo art festival by roping in Ai Weiwei, the fiery Chinese dissident artist. And that's precisely what's happened. Suddenly, Navajo TIME, an annual festival that takes place deep in the desert in the American Southwest, is making headlines. Of the ten works commissioned by the state arts agency of New Mexico, the one that's causing all the fuss is Pull of the Moon, an international collaboration between Ai — who remains captive in China since running afoul of the government a few years ago — and Bert Benally, a Navajo artist you've probably never heard of.

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One of those things is not like the other. So how did Ai's work end up on Coyote Canyon, thousands of miles from his home? According to a report by Artnet, organizers reached out to his studio knowing the publicity boost Navajo TIME would receive if Ai participated, not expecting that to happen:

"To their surprise, he agreed. 'For him to be interested in a project like this is like one in a million,' Santa Fe art advisor Eileen Braziel, who suggested contacting the Chinese artist, told the Albuquerque Journal. "He immediately said he was interested." Apparently, the dramatic landscapes of Coyote Canyon reminded the artist of the labor camp where he had grown up in Western China during the Cultural Revolution."

To create his share of the earth art, Ai sent ground-down pottery shards from his notorious Dropping The Vase series. In a press release, the artist calls the shards "evidence of the powder's origin." He continues: "I think this is an interesting idea because we can only see ourselves, our past, through material evidence such as these shards. It is important to pass on to future generations where we are from and to give a glimpse of the mind and soul of the people living in that time."

The powder was shaped into a design drawn up by Ai. The project is necessarily ephemeral (TIME stands for Temporary Installations Made for the Environment). While this means it's no longer possible to see Pull Of The Moon in its original form, related works are in the planning stages, including sound art based on the audio captured at Coyote Canyon during the installation, and a film about the making of the project.

CORRECTION: A previous version of this story misidentified the source of the pottery shards used in Pull Of The Moon.