

I Made an Earthwork the Size of a New York City Block. Here's How it Changed Me.

It's 1992. New York City. Hot. Humid. Dirty. The pavement pulsing heat up into my boots.

I'm a cowboy-boot wearing Kansas man standing outside of real estate mogul Donald Trump's office tower, staring up at that behemoth of a building, getting up the nerve to go inside. I've come to the big apple to ask Trump for some land.

No, I wasn't trying to get into real estate, I wanted to create an earthwork on his property on the Hudson River so I could achieve my most ambitious work to date, and hopefully... become known by the world.

I go inside, work my midwestern charm with Trump's VP Andy Weiss. I convince him this will be good for business, good publicity, and good for Trump. What else was he planning to do with this vacant lot on the West Side?

Thirty minutes later we're shaking hands. Apparently my timing was great and my asking price was good. All I wanted was the land itself. He was a bit stunned to say the least.

It took 9 months to create this image.

[SLIDE - Benton artwork and Earthwork side by side]

Countryside -- A tribute to Thomas Hart Benton, a Kansas artist with a love/hate relationship with the modernists of New York. A little *country in the city* and a symbolic depiction of my journey from a SW Kansas farm town to the concrete canyons of the Big Apple.

I didn't do it alone, though.

[SLIDE - Stan working with 3 guys]

Meet Lonewolf, John and Ryan.

(As an aside) Here we are planting kale. I got these plants from an upstate nursery. For this earthwork I used 'found' materials from the site, the image was framed with one hundred year old timbers from sailing ships back in the day. I brought in vegetables, top soil, flowers and panted Kansas wheat and soybeans. And that topsoil had to be trucked in from upstate because the soil on Manhattan island is lifeless.

(Back to the point) These guys were homeless men, living in the underbelly of Manhattan. Lonewolf, on the left there, said he was from Canada, a drop-out from NYU and claimed to be a friend of Pierre Trudeau. John was from the midwest somewhere..... And Ryan - a graffiti artist from California. All of them adventurers, free from the confines of any system.

[SLIDE - Earthwork from the air, showing the city surrounding it]

We'd dine on food truck fare, argue about which plants would make it in this rough environment, talk politics and religion and family life. They were not only my assistants, but became my companions.

It was an otherworldly experience when you factor in my weekly trips to the Trump plaza to meet with the VPs. Many worlds had to come together to see this piece come to life.

You can imagine how crucial these friendships became for me, an artist from Kansas, who left his wife and four year old boy 1500 miles away to come get discovered.

Come to find out, the work had an impact on these guys' lives as well. It was my first taste of how my art, and art in general, can bring down

barriers, draw out the humanity in us, and hopefully find common ground.

I know, that sounds a little hippie-dippy. But you can see how this story plays out in the feature film *Earthwork*, starring John Hawkes - who plays me!

[SLIDE - Herd and Hawkes on set]

That film, as does my story, begins in Protection.

Protection, KS.

[SLIDE - still from NBC news story]

My hometown was known for being the first *entire* town inoculated with the brand new Polio vaccine in 1956. That's my younger brother, Stewart, preparing for the shot with me on the ready and our family behind us. It made national news and we thought we were famous.

[SLIDE - siblings]

This is me and my brothers and sister. I grew up on a farm that had been in my family for two generations.

I spent plenty of sweaty summer afternoons feeding cattle, or riding a tractor, digging up the soil. I loved the smell of the earth after a rain, the feel of it in my fingers, the way I could interact with the land to create something new and life-giving.

But I was raised, along with my brothers and sister, to move on from life on the farm.....to become a doctor or lawyer, an airline pilot — something that made money and wouldn't leave dirt under my fingernails. That was my parents' plan, and though I, too, wanted to

escape the rural culture of my roots as I became an adult, still I knew from a young age that I *wanted* to stay connected to the land.

I just didn't know how.

I went to Wichita State for a year of art school, and this was during the late 1960s when the nation was in upheaval and people were starting to reconsider some of our country's long-held beliefs. I connected with the radical ideas being expressed in those tumultuous years, especially those of young native people. And I came home from school looking like this.

[SLIDE - Holding guitar]

A long-haired hippie with radical ideas.

I then spent a couple years living and bartending at the Brookside Club in downtown Wichita, trying to fit in to an urban world, but I eventually came home to take stock of my life.

[DOUBLE SLIDE - Feeding cattle and a painting of Stan's side by side]

I helped my dad on the farm and took odd jobs, painted canvases and read art history books, focusing on the impressionists and then Picasso, ending up with Thomas Benton and his student, Jackson Pollack.

[SLIDE - Painting Joplin Mural]

My entryway into large-form works was through painting murals around the state. This is of Scott Joplin, the originator of ragtime piano. I was getting lots of commissions for murals on buildings, and began to picture myself climbing the ladder in the mural art world.

But one fateful day, I rented a single prop Cessna and was flying over the Kansas landscape - looking down at a single tractor plowing a line

across the ground -- and I had a realization: this land that I loved so much could be my canvas. I could chase my dreams combining the two things that meant so much to me.

[DOUBLE SLIDE - Cerros Unitas, Running Fence]

I certainly wasn't the first person to think of creating images on the face of the planet. I started researching everything I could about others who had done the same — who had made designs out of nature.

I discovered Cerros Unitas, a 600 ft sculpture in Chile, Stonehenge, Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty and eventually Christo's work, the Running Fence.

In the era before wikipedia ...I couldn't find any earthworks artists who had created something representational.

Christo's Running Fence is the one where things really clicked in my mind. That the work itself is not the final fence placement or the photograph of it draped across the undulating California landscape...but the whole process, the dance of convincing those not involved in the art world, from farmers, landowners, environmentalists and community, to embrace the artist's efforts. The actual art is just the final manifestation of the process. It brought people together.

Deciding on what my first earthwork would be took little time. The Kiowa people were still living just south of my hometown in the Oklahoma panhandle and the idea of paying tribute to this native tribe fit my political and artistic bent.

I began to connect with and gain a better understanding of native people's treatment in this country, through the activities of the American Indian Movement—something I've been interested in and my work has

related to ever since. And an image of Chief Satanta of the Kiowa nation felt like the best way to honor this tribe while connecting my community to their land and humble origins, near the land my grandfather settled one hundred years earlier.

I struggled for two years to get this earthwork made. The struggle was not so much in the mechanics of making it — my process of sketching out the image on a field sketch and marking a grid of one inch sections, scaled to 40 ft on the land — has not changed.

[SLIDE - Drawing of Grid]

After choosing fields, two years in a row, a hail storm destroyed the wheat crop. This made everything that much more stressful and I didn't pursue it.

[SLIDE - Chief Satanta]

But eventually I completed it. A 160-acre portrait of this famous war chief. The image brought many in the community together, including the Kiowa, while opening a dialogue about, and respect for, some forgotten people of our land.

Even though it was a temporal piece that got swallowed back up by the elements in a few short weeks, for me, it was the birth of insight into art being not about the end result, but about the process and an agent of change.

[SLIDE - La Nina y el Vento]

I remember the first time I was changed by a piece of art. It was on a trip to Francisco Amighetti's studio in Costa Rica where I saw his work *La Nina y el Vento*. It embraced a narrative about how young women of child bearing age, in many regions of the world, are taken by the male

population without their consent. This single piece of art changed me, and it still motivates me today.

I went on to create a number of earthworks representing indigenous people and their traditions.

[DOUNLE SLIDE - Medicine Wheel and Chief]

After moving to Lawrence, KS I worked with Haskell Indian Nations University to create the medicine wheel. It was a high honor to be included in the culture of that school which represents 230 Native tribes across the country.

Fast forward a dozen years and I was feeling the pain that many artists feel: I was broke, and no one was really seeing my work in flyover country. (At 30 thousand feet they were flying over way too high to see them.)

I needed to get eyeballs on my art, lots of them. I needed to get paid for my work. I needed something big to happen.

This is what led me to the streets of New York, riding the subways, sleeping in the hotel or sometimes on the empty lot itself, trying to create something that would get some attention.

Things turned out quite differently than I had planned. My goal was to become known, an artist of importance, a far cry from why I started making crop art in the beginning, but I ended up learning some important lessons from that endeavor.

[SLIDE - Stan and Ryan)

I watched as these homeless men — my friends — began to feel purpose, began to work in the earth themselves, and how it seemed to bring them dignity. I watched as they engaged with the art and I realized

that the true value of the work I do was in the way it *involved* community, *builds* community, connecting people who might otherwise not see their commonality.

Homeless men, instilled with purpose, working towards something bigger than themselves, on land that Donald Trump owned—you don't get people from more diverse backgrounds than that, coming together to make something beautiful.

When I finally met Trump in his office, at the culmination of the work, the first thing he said was, "Tell me about the homeless guys." I said "They have a lot of similarities to you. They get up every day when they want to, don't have anyone telling them what to do and they seem pretty satisfied with their freedom." He thought that was pretty funny.

Earthworks aren't a one-man show. I must engage with others to make them happen and the energy out of those relationships gives me hope. And from what I've seen, it gives others hope, too.

With that new knowledge, I returned to Kansas, not rich and famous, but *enriched* and ready to keep on keeping on with my life's work. I not only literally returned to my roots, I returned to the reason I began making art in the first place. For the love of it, and for what it seemed to bring about in the world.

[DOUBLE SLIDE - Absolut Vodka and Kelsey Ballerini]

I also do commercial work. Here's a logo for Absolut Vodka And a recent portrait of country singer Kelsey Ballerini, commissioned by Spotify. That's what helps make it possible to do the transformative work like the portrait series of native peoples in their homelands.

[SLIDE]

Carole Cadue. From the portrait *La Nina y el Viento-Little Girl in the Wind*. Created on the Land Institute in Salina, KS, a cutting-edge agriculture and environmental research farm earning a global reputation. The image was temporary and created out of a semi-virgin prairie, embracing the Land Institute's philosophy of sustainable agriculture.

[SLIDE - White Rose)

Rosa Blanca -- a small earthwork of Jose Marti's famous poem "I Cultivate a White Rose" in Havana, Cuba, in the face of the Bush administration's attempted ban on travel there. We were a part of an international intrigue.

[SLIDE - Young Woman of Brazil]

I planned to make this image of a native woman in Brazil (this is of a mock-up I created in Kansas City in preparation). It would have been located just outside a favella, a slum, as an experiment of bringing art with functioning gardens to a relatively desolate place, to see how the community there interacted with it. But the six years of pursuing my portrait of 'Young Woman of Brazil' would be temporarily lost to the changing political winds in South America and the World. I will return.

[SLIDE - Young Woman of China]

Just over a year ago, I completed one of my most thrilling and largest earthworks yet. This is an indigenous Chinese woman from the Yi Group, titled "Young Woman of China."

For 17 months I worked alongside the native Yi people, from whom I learned so much, to create this 4-acre piece. And I had to utilize the knowledge of much smarter folks than myself to make it happen: horticulturalists, farmers, photographers, land owners, county officials,

lawyers. It took a village, as they say, to make this giant piece of art take shape. It was a highlight of my life, as it exemplified the idea of my earthworks bringing people together.

So what's next?

[SLIDE - Fibonacci layered over Qatar]

Now, after 69 years of living on this earth, I have a new dream that keeps me up at night:

It spans more ground than I've ever dreamt of. The FGEI (Fibonacci Global Earthwork Initiative) is two designs in two disparate parts of the world, one here in the States and the other in Qatar. This pattern, which splays out to infinity could be tracked, traced and marked as in circumnavigates the globe before connecting at a central point on the planet.

This project will be a life-size, visible metaphor for the thing I learned on that fated trip to New York City in 1992. It will demonstrate that art connects us as humans, that art brings people together from all walks of life.

At this time of great divisiveness in the world, seeking common ground with other nations and cultures is imperative.

[SLIDE - Stan and Evan in NY]

A few years ago, I took my son, Evan, now 28, to the spot where I created that earthwork in NYC. The lot is no longer there -- replaced with a Trump skyscraper. We walked the streets, ate the food truck fare, and stayed in the same hotel I stayed in 20 years ago.

And you're not going to believe this, but on one of those walks in the streets of New York, we passed someone I recognized crossing the street in front of us. He stopped and looked at me.

"Stan?"

I couldn't believe it. "Ryan?" I replied. It was one of the homeless guys who had helped me all those years before. Only he was no longer homeless.

Over the next few hours, he described to me and my son how after the earthwork was complete, he felt something he hadn't experienced since he was a child. A sense of pride had surfaced inside of him. It was that pride that gave him the courage to go back to California and reunite with his family. He shared that he had created something they would be proud of. It brought tears to my eyes.

So now, at age 69, I've traveled the world, made art that I love with all sorts of people, ridden the roller coaster of seven decades. And as I look ahead and this next one, I am filled with hope. I believe the best is yet to come. Life, to me, should be lived as a great adventure, and I plan to continue living mine with that idea at the forefront. Bringing people together, finding common ground, and trying to make a difference in this wide, wide world.