

Bringing the Cutting-Edge to Santa Fe

BY [Ann Landi](#) POSTED 07/09/14

At SITE Santa Fe, Irene Hofmann is upending the model of the biennial, with a six-year run of shows dedicated to the contemporary art of the Americas

It was during an art-history survey class in college that [Irene Hofmann](#), director and chief curator of [SITE Santa Fe in New](#)

[Mexico](#), first considered an art career. The survey ended with Marcel Duchamp, and “that’s where it sparked for me,” Hofmann recalls. “Duchamp had abandoned so much of what was being done up till then.”

Just as the maverick Dadaist overturned artistic conventions in the first decades of the last century, Hofmann has been following a similar impulse in her 20 years with museums across the country. At SITE since 2010, she has been working with contemporary artists to explore “what is urgent to art today,” in her words, within the institution’s 15,000-square-foot exhibition space.

For instance, “[Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art](#)” (a traveling survey that originated at the [University of Chicago’s Smart Museum](#)) presented a history of the artist-orchestrated meal in works by [Marina Abramović](#), [Felix Gonzalez-Torres](#), [Daniel Spoerri](#), and [Gordon Matta-Clark](#), among others. One highlight was *The Dining Project* (first performed in 1995), in which artist [Lee Mingwei](#) cooked and served dinner for three strangers whose names were drawn at random, at a Japanese-style table installed in one of the galleries. As chief curator, Hofmann has organized a multimedia “immersive environment” dedicated to the works of [Enrique Martínez Celaya](#) and “Time-Lapse,” a group show that changed by the hour, day, and week. Now, she’s aiming to revamp the familiar model of the biennial (more on that later).



Irene Hofmann says she’s always searching for “what is urgent to art today.”

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For this sun-baked Southwestern town, SITE is a long way from the tourist shops and galleries on Canyon Road, some of which still offer vistas of cowboys and Indians, pueblos and canyons. And Hofmann—a raven-haired, pale-skinned, hyper-articulate woman with an infectious laugh—is a long way from her roots in Southern California, where she remembers her only childhood museum visit was a day trip to the traveling King Tut extravaganza. “I ran away from the state as fast as I could,” she says.

After her junior year at [Washington University in Saint Louis](#), the art-history major landed an internship at the [New Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in New York, working as the assistant to founding director [Marcia Tucker](#). “I was at the museum every day and absorbed everything I could,” Hofmann recalls. “Suddenly, I could see the possibilities for a job.” The experience also convinced her that she wanted to work with living artists, and so she chose to do graduate work at the [School of the Art Institute of Chicago](#), where most of her classes included studio-art students.

Her first curatorial position was at the [Cranbrook Art Museum](#), in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, where she rose rapidly from assistant curator to curator in a venue she describes as “wildly experimental.” There, she worked with artists from all over the globe, curated around 18 shows a year, learned how to raise funds, and brought in contemporary artists like [Gregory Green](#), [Andrea Zittel](#), and [Mark Dion](#).

In 2001, Hofmann returned to Southern California to become curator at the [Orange County Museum of Art](#). Suddenly, she realized, “California felt like home.” OCMA had a long history of smart surveys, and it hosted the Newport Biennial. But those shows tended to focus on regional themes. “We decided that this exhibition needed to get much bigger and bolder or not exist at all,” Hofmann says of the Newport Biennial. “We renamed it the California Biennial and went all over the state, visiting studios. We showed the rest of the world what was going on in this explosion of West Coast art.”

Four years later, Hofmann moved cross-country again to become director of the [Contemporary Museum in Baltimore](#). It was a culture shock. “Orange County is in an idyllic outdoor setting, and my first week in Baltimore I was picking up hypodermic needles from in front of the museum,” she says. With only 2,500 square feet of gallery space, Hofmann reached out to the community, mounting shows in venues that had been “boarded up for years” and bringing in artists who “had a sensitivity toward this kind of exploration.” One of those projects was an “[Edible Estate](#),” by [Fritz Haeg](#), in which the artist and volunteers planted a garden of fruits, vegetables, and herbs on a Baltimore resident’s front lawn.

By the time SITE Santa Fe came calling, Hofmann had the biennial experience under her belt, along with many years of working with noncollecting institutions dedicated to experimentation. Of late, she has been rethinking the biennial, which has been in place at SITE since 1995, with the goal of upending the tradition of a lone curator putting together one sprawling exhibition. (Previous SITE biennials have been curated by [Lance Fung](#), [Robert Storr](#), [Dave Hickey](#), and other art-world luminaries.) After convening a roundtable of curators at her home two years ago, Hofmann discovered “a general feeling that there ought to be another way,” she says. “The model that flourished in the late ’90s and early 2000s served SITE well, but it’s clear the biennial is in need of another perspective.”

This year’s biennial, which has been rechristened SITElines and opens on July 20, is titled “[Unsettled Landscapes](#),” and it marks the launch of a six-year commitment to showcasing the art of the Americas. Each of the three biennials during that period (in 2014, 2016, and 2018) will be organized by a group of curators rather than a single person. The curatorial team for “Unsettled Landscapes” includes [Lucía Sanromán](#), [Janet Dees](#), [Candice Hopkins](#), and Hofmann, plus a dozen advisers from across the Western Hemisphere.

The biennials will focus on three topics that have long engaged artists living in the Americas—namely, landscape, territory, and trade. One example of such work in “Unsettled Landscapes” is Bogotá native [Miler Lagos](#)’s sculpture based on an ancient myth about the origin of the Amazon: according to the story, the impact of a giant fallen tree created the mighty river and its tributaries throughout South America. Lagos is making a 14½-foot tree carved from stacked editions of the local newspaper, the [Santa Fe New Mexican](#), in a gesture that ties into the show’s themes of landscape and using local resources.

Another project is Michigan-born [Jason Middlebrook](#)’s construction of a general store, resembling the ones from old Hollywood Westerns, to be situated outdoors behind SITE’s main galleries. The small objects that will constitute his store’s initial “stock” can only be acquired through barter. “Visitors, shoppers, and clerks assign value to each object—the one being acquired and the one proposed for trade—so the pieces will change over the course of the exhibition,” Hofmann explains.

Other artists in “Unsettled Landscapes” include [Agnes Denes](#), [Andrea Bowers](#), [Pablo Helguera](#), [Gianfranco Foschino](#), [Ohotaq Mikkigak](#), [Blue Curry](#), and [Futurefarmers](#). After the current biennial closes early next year, organizers will invite artists featured in the past to show their work—and to act as curators.

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As for the several educational programs SITE offers, Hofmann is proudest of one in which teenagers respond to exhibitions by making zines that get passed out to visitors. “Often it’s the younger kids who have access to special kinds of engagement, but teens are an amazing audience for us,” she says.

“I’m looking to create an institution that is distinctive, so that when you walk into our galleries it’s clear where you are. We are using our assets—our building, our history, our community—to create a special experience of contemporary art,” Hofmann continues. “In all the jobs I’ve had, I’ve always had the ambition of not wanting to be just another cookie-cutter art museum.”

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