



SITelines: A Reimagined Biennial with a Focus on the Americas

By Marsha Pearce Friday, July 18th, 2014

Over the years there has been a proliferation of perennial exhibitions across the globe, with the term biennial referring to what Filipovic et al (2010) see as a “vast landscape” of contemporary art production, display, distribution and discourse. Yet, the particulars of that landscape, with its expansiveness, can be obfuscated. The word landscape is synonymous with “view” and, in gazing at a view – as a whole or sum – we can lose sight of its parts. WJT Mitchell (2002) notes that we often say: look at the view, “[n]ot ‘look at the mountain’ (or the ocean, the sky, the plains, the forest, the city, the river)”. He therefore asserts, “the invitation to look at landscape is an invitation not to look at any specific *thing*, but to ignore all particulars in favor of an appreciation of a total gestalt, a vista or scene... [it is a] drawing back from a site” (pp. vii-viii). With over 150 perennial exhibitions in various parts of the world – as estimated on the Biennial

Foundation website – any one biennial can easily become lost when we look at the enormous landscape. How then, might a biennial become a visibly distinctive feature of this vista? This is a question to which the SITE Santa Fe art organisation has responded, and it has done so by taking up Mitchell’s proposal of considering landscape in relation to *place* and *space*.



Kent Monkman, *Bête Noir*, 2014. Installation view. Mixed media. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Sargent’s Daughters Gallery, New York. Photo by Eric Swanson

The SITE Santa Fe International Biennial of contemporary art was founded in 1995. At the time it was the only international biennial in the United States. Since then, numerous international exhibitions have materialised. SITE Santa Fe’s answer to this ever-unfolding art context is a reimagined biennial called *SITelines: New Perspectives of Art of the Americas*. It is a new

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format conceived as a six-year commitment to a series of linked exhibitions, which will take place in 2014, 2016 and 2018. The transformed biennial uses geographical place as its framework, taking New Mexico as a critical, starting location for rich investigations and expanding that place to the Americas – stretching from Nunavut, the northernmost territory of Canada, to Tierra del Fuego, an archipelago off the southernmost part of the South American mainland. Buckminster Fuller’s Dymaxion Map, which visually describes the Americas as one island mass or a set of contiguous places, has served as a guiding approach for drawing into the Americas as a site for close, considered engagement; allowing eyes and minds to focus on a specific point – a point with many nodes and dimensions – within the vast biennial landscape. In an interview for IFEM, Irene Hofmann, the Phillips Director and Chief Curator of SITE Santa Fe, and Lucía Sanromán, one of the curators of the 2014 *SITelines* exhibition, talk about this conscious shift in focus:

Very few biennials have the capacity and resources to truly operate with a global scope. Rather than aspiring to be global, we are advocating for a biennial model that offers a very specific point of view or focus while at the same time also having a meaningful connection to the local community and history.

If the place of the Americas is the new focal point, then the many spaces of that place, or put another way, the multitudinous practices in and experiences and narratives of that place are also a centre of interest. At the core of the Americas as place and space is SITE Santa Fe’s deep concern with contemporary art practice as a significant space, in itself, for knowledge creation and contestation. SITE Santa Fe’s revised biennial model not only attends to the vast biennial landscape; it also addresses a broad, global contemporary art landscape, stirring us to concentrate our gaze and zero in on the features of art coming out of the Americas. Each of the



Jason Middlebrook, *Your General Store*, 2014, Shipping container, wood, paint, reclaimed barn windows, glass, concrete, native plants from New Mexico, steel, leather, plastic, canvas, yarn, thread, soil, SITE Santa Fe commission. Courtesy of the artist, Lora Reynolds Gallery, Austin, and Monique Meloche, Chicago. Photo by Eric Swanson.

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three exhibitions will be organised by a different team of curators who will be required to spend extended time in Santa Fe in an effort to forge meaningful interactions with the community. This is a strategy that aims to counteract the phenomenon of the biennial curator who drops into a region/area for a brief period; the curator who has minimal contact with the context within which artworks are created and shown. The linking of the three exhibitions will also facilitate a sustained conversation, with multiple voices and perspectives over time – eschewing a sense of ephemerality that can come with ideas addressed in and through artworks presented in discrete shows with “one-off” themes that start and end with no promise of being picked up again. Included in this redefined understanding of the biennial is the SITE Center, which will offer education and outreach activities before, during and after each *SITelines* exhibition as a means of heightening continuity between the exhibitions and fostering public engagement. The SITE Center will also host artists in residence who are expected to undertake community-based or site-specific projects that will be on view as part of the *SITelines* exhibitions.



Johanna Calle, *Perímetros (Ceiba) / Perimeters (Ceiba)*, 2014. Typewritten text on found notary registry sheets. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Eric Swanson.

This year's exhibition (the first in the biennial exhibition series) is entitled *SITelines.2014: Unsettled Landscapes*. The event aims to trouble or agitate hasty, simplistic views of North, Central and South America – indeed to complicate ways of seeing – by investigating little known stories and vantage points, from both past and present moments. The exhibition also considers

the notion of landscape as a verb. Again we can look to WJT Mitchell for an understanding of “landscape” as a doing word. He writes:

we [ought to] think of landscape, not as an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed...[We should] ask not just what landscape “is” or “means” but what it does, how it works as a cultural practice. Landscape...doesn’t merely signify or symbolize power relations; it is an instrument of cultural power...Landscape as a cultural medium...has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site. Thus, landscape (whether urban or rural, artificial or natural) always greets us as space, as environment, as that within which “we” (figured as “the figures” in the landscape) find – or lose –ourselves. (pp. 1-2)

SITELines.2014 activates these concerns. Using the themes of landscape, territory and trade, the exhibition will shed light on the nexus of representations of the land, movements *across* the land, and economies and resources derived *from* the land. Works in the exhibition attend to concerns about borders, they uncover biases, confront clichés, give voice to silenced histories, subvert the traditions of European landscape painting, address tourism and eco-politics, take an activist stance and challenge capitalist frameworks, among other matters. *Unsettled Landscapes* is curated by Irene

Hofmann, Janet Dees, who is Curator of Special Projects at SITE Santa Fe, and independent

curators Lucía Sanromán and Candice Hopkins. This team is supported by five satellite curatorial advisors with ties to the Americas: Christopher Cozier from Trinidad and Tobago, Inti Guerrero from Colombia, Julieta Gonzalez from Venezuela, Eva Grinstein from Argentina and Kitty Scott from Canada.



Miler Lagos, *The Great Tree* (detail), 2014, Newsprint, steel, SITE Santa Fe commission. Courtesy of the artist and MagnanMetz Gallery, New York. Photo: Eric Swanson.

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The show features 45 artists and artist collaboratives from 15 countries, with new and existing works and several offsite installations. Among the list of creatives are artists from the Caribbean and its Diasporas: Blue Curry of the Bahamas, Marcel Pinas of Suriname, Glenda León of Cuba and Deborah Jack of the Netherlands/St Maarten. Marcel Pinas will construct his contribution to the exhibition in Suriname, working with elements of Maroon culture. Blue Curry presents live webcam feeds of tourist cruise liners arriving and departing from Caribbean shores – vessels which alter the tropical landscape. In addition, he will have beach towel flags hoisted daily at SITE Santa Fe as an emblematic commentary on territory, leisure and the consumption of place. Deborah Jack shares her 2006 installation *Bounty*, which consists of thirty 10×10-inch light boxes that hold slides of St Maarten’s Great Salt Pond, a resource exploited by Dutch colonisers for trade. Co-curator Janet Dees describes Jack’s work: “At first glance, the landscape may appear to be Arctic – the antithesis of the Caribbean locale. The small scale of the images lends to the disorienting effect.” Glenda León will use the trees on SITE Santa Fe’s grounds and the nearby 13-acre Railyard Park to recreate her 2004 installation *Esperanza (Out of Season)*. Co-curator Irene Hofmann explains how León executed the first version of the piece: “[B]ranches with fake leaves were glued to a large maple in a public park in Montreal. Installed at the height of summer, the work was at first virtually invisible...As the tree’s natural leaves changed colors in the autumn, the bright green imitators became visible for the first time. When the real leaves fell off in the winter, the artificial ones remained, a reminder of the cycles of nature, the passage of time, and the promise of seasons yet to come.” León’s work is characterised by an attention to notions of change and endurance over time, through her use of natural and artificial elements.

These artists and their creative outputs constitute part of the exhibition’s consideration of new perspectives.

In engaging a self-reflexive critique – looking at its own operations with a fresh take – SITE Santa Fe opens up a space of potential that provokes us in the Americas to look at ourselves and our contexts anew; to inscribe nuanced landscapes of



Deborah Jack, *The Bounty Series*, 2007. Photo of the installation on display in the Infinite Islands exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, 2007. Image courtesy of Africanah.org

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understanding; to not pull back and simply survey a broad view of place, space and self but rather to get closer, to test the limits of the sky, to search the depths of seemingly still waters, to illuminate the nooks and crannies and to explore the peaks and valleys.



Blue Curry, Flag from the S.S.s. project, 2014.

SITelines.2014: Unsettled Landscapes runs from July 20, 2014 to January 11, 2015, with opening festivities held between July 17-19. One feature of the opening events is the *SITelines* panel discussion hosted by the Davidoff Art Initiative on Saturday July 19. The talk is entitled “Confronting Paradise: Land and Landscape in the Caribbean” and brings Caribbean artists Blue Curry, Christopher Cozier, Deborah Jack, Sara Hermann and Glenda León into conversation with each other.

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An exterior shot of SITE Santa Fe, with a flagpole flying flags from Blue Curry's S.S.s. piece.

SITelines.2014: Unsettled Landscapes participating artists (Full list alphabetized by last name)
Shuvinai Ashoona (Canada) / Jamison Chas Banks (USA) / Raymond Boisjoly (Canada) / Andrea Bowers (USA) / Matthew Buckingham (USA) / Adriana Bustos (Argentina) / Johanna Calle (Colombia) / Luis Camnitzer (Uruguay/USA) / Liz Cohen (USA) / Minerva Cuevas (Mexico) / Blue Curry (Bahamas/Great Britain) / Agnes Denes (USA) / Juan Downey (Chile) / Marcos Ramírez ERRE & David Taylor (Mexico/USA) / Gianfranco Foschino (Chile) / Furturefarmers (USA) / Anna Bella Geiger (Brazil) / Andrea Geyer (Germany/USA) / Frank Gohlke (USA) / Pablo Helguera (Mexico/USA) / James Hyde (USA) / Deborah Jack (Netherlands/Saint Martin/USA) / Yishai Jusidman (Mexico/USA) / Leandro Katz (Argentina/USA) / Irene Kopelman (Argentina) / Miler Lagos (Colombia) / Glenda León (Cuba) / Ric Lum (USA) / Antonio Vega Macotella (Mexico) / Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle (Spain/USA) / Gilda Mantilla & Raimond Chaves (Peru) / Daniel Joseph Martinez (USA) / Jason Middlebrook (USA) / Ohotaq Mikkigak (Canada) / Kent Monkman (Canada) / Patrick Nagatani (USA) / Florence Miller Pierce (USA) / Marcel Pinas (Suriname) / Edward Poitras (Canada) / Fernando Palma Rodríguez (Mexico) / Kevin Schmidt (Canada) / Allan Sekula (USA) / Melanie Smith (Great Britain/Mexico) / Charles Stankieveh (Canada) / Clarissa Tossin (Brazil)

To learn more and follow the *SITelines.2014: Unsettled Landscapes* exhibition, visit the SITE Santa Fe website.