

# ARTFORUM

## SITE Specificity

August 3rd, 2016

— Chelsea Weathers

**IT'S ALWAYS A DELICATE NEGOTIATION** to arrive in a place and to participate without seeming an interloper, an outsider foisting ideas.

The five curators of SITE Santa Fe's biennial, "SITElines: much wider than a line"—Rocío Aranda-Alvarado, Kathleen Ash-Milby, Pip Day, Pablo León de la Barra, and Kiki Mazzucchelli—have clearly made an effort to avoid simply parachuting into a region and imposing their values onto local communities. During the two days I spent at "SITElines's" opening events, a particular image kept recurring to me: a central, almost monstrous figure with a strength that amounts to a sort of gravitational pull, bringing all the artists and the regions they represent into the same orbit, with all of the pieces, at all times, threatening to fly back out into the vacuum of space.

The afternoon of Thursday of July 14, preparators were putting the finishing touches on some of the installations as the curators and artists guided the press through the spacious galleries of SITE Santa Fe, where the exhibition is held. Keeping all the components together and in communication is a constant challenge. The curators for this show had two years to think and collaborate, and this involved Skype calls, meetings, and studio visits across multiple countries. The show, which uses local architecture and print culture as its anchors, still feels like a convocation of far-flung individuals. And so it feels like a community—something that has been constructed but that makes its own meaning out of that constructedness.



Left: Artist Jorge Gonzalez. Right: Curator Rocío Aranda-Albarado and artist Marta Minujín.

During the members' preview on Friday, I walked around with artist and curator Noah Simblist. We talked about how tactile and understated the exhibition seemed, in spite of its size and scale. Simblist contrasted "SITElines's" minimal wall text and the general lack of high-tech multimedia installation with biennials of the early 2000s, where flash and splash seemed de rigueur. This biennial, while not short on stimuli—there's plenty of digital video, music, and film—remains quiet, putting craft front and center, including Xenobia Bailey's homage to her homemaker mother and grandmother, a crocheted installation modeled after a church revival tent, and Benvenuto Chavajay's ceramic guns, which look delicate until you realize they are casts of actual weapons that the US sent to Guatemala in the 1950s. Many of the works invited the viewers to touch or use them. Carla Fernandez's gorgeous capes, which she made using Mexican Indigenous techniques and embroidery, were installed on hangers and near a full-length mirror to encourage visitors to put them on. No journalist in the room could resist taking photos of the artists and curators posing in them. Jorge Gonzalez worked with craftspeople in his native Puerto Rico to learn how to make folding stools with woven seats. Visitors carried them from work to work so they could sit and look for a while.

At the opening, I sat in Gonzalez's chair for a long time in front of the copies of *El Corno Emplumado/The Plumed Horn*, an Albuquerque-based literary magazine that Margaret Randall produced from 1961–68, featuring art and poetry from New Mexico, Latin America, and elsewhere. Actual issues, not facsimiles, were out for viewers to peruse, which as a former archivist I found thrilling. Randall, who must be in her seventies, was also there. She told me she has five books being published this year, one of which is an anthology of Cuban poetry.



Left: Artists Paolo Nazareth and Benvenuto Chavajay. Right: Artist Xenobia Bailey with her work *Sistah Paradise's Great Walls of Fire Revival Tent*.

Even Maria Hupfield's performance during the exhibition preview felt intimate, though it was packed with people and incorporated recorded music, participation by other "SITElines" artists, and, at one point, a bullhorn. Hupfield donned heavy felt mittens and boots, her Canadian-ness looking intentionally absurd in the context of the New Mexico high desert. A colleague repeated a refrain:

*This is a place*

*A place where one needs to practice good relations*

*Good relations with neighboring nations*

*Presence is required*

*Presence is required to maintain those good relationships*

*Communication is required*

*Required to jointly caretake this region*

During the members' party, I got a sense from Hupfield, as well as from Jonathas de Andrade, whose reworking of UNESCO's *Race and Class in Rural Brazil* foregrounded the flawed methodology of mid-twentieth-century anthropology, of a true investment in the people who live and work here. Personal histories are integral to each of their practices in very different ways, but a respect for those histories is what drives them.

Toward the end of the preview, I made my way out back, where plates of hors d'oeuvres lay atop a large table, on a bed of living grass. I grabbed the night's signature cocktail, a delicious vodka concoction, and spotted artist Harmony Hammond speaking animatedly to her friend Juliet Myers. Though we don't know each other, the seventy-two-year-old Hammond grabbed my hand and started talking to me like we were old friends. I told her about how I decided to move here with my girlfriend after we drove through on our way to the *Spiral Jetty* and an unsuccessful search for Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels*. She told me a story about traveling across Utah and New Mexico with a van full of friends, visiting Holt's favorite sites after she had died. After the long day of thinking about traversing geographies and the relationships that tie the disparate elements of a community together, this was a pinnacle. I knew I had come to the right place.