

The Exhibitionist

Thinking and Doing in the Borders: SITElines.2016

August 31, 2016 | [Carla Acevedo-Yates](#)



Abel Rodríguez, drawing from the series “The Cycle of the Maloca Plants; Studies of Principal Trees in the Forest; Trees with Legends; The Cultivated Plants of the Center People; Drawings of Pineapples; Drawings of Cassavas and Other Tubers,” ca. 2009. Courtesy of Tropenbos International, Colombia CAP.

The semiotician Walter Mignolo introduced the term “border thinking” to locate the point of origination of decolonial thought—a critical way of thinking that questions the logic of Western centrism and hierarchical power structures. For Mignolo, border thinking and doing creates the conditions to produce an “immigrant consciousness,” one

that could allow us to delink from Western hegemonic narratives. *SITelines: New Perspectives on Art of the Americas* is a program of biennials planned by SITE Santa Fe for 2014, 2016, and 2018. In its second iteration, *SITelines* seems to draw on the ideas and methods of decolonial thought in its aim to create a focused regional exhibition of contemporary practices. Curated collectively by Rocío Aranda Alvarado, Kathleen Ash-Milby, Pip Day, Pablo León de la Barra, and Kiki Mazuchelli, the curatorial methodology mirrors the concept of the biennial, presenting collaboration and cross-cultural pollination within indistinct and often fuzzy authorial borders.

The SITE Santa Fe Biennial, the oldest international biennial in the United States, reimagined itself as *SITelines* in 2014. Narrowing its focus to the Americas, *SITelines* approaches the exhibition format as a long-term platform to discuss ideas and experiment with new modalities. Considering New Mexico's long-standing history with Land art—an art movement that alienated the land from its history—it seems all the more important to address the land not only as material, surface, or object, but also as a repository of native histories and contested politics. Shifting the conversation from the site-specific to the site-responsive, *SITelines.2016* (subtitled *much wider than a line*) reframes borders as contiguous lines that interconnect the geographies of the Americas.

Mignolo defines colonialism as the dark side of modernity. And in *much wider than a line*, the concept of darkness—shadowy blind spots and erasures of history—emerges as a prevalent theme. Combating these shared forms of blindness, the exhibition champions practices that envision art as a form of knowledge production and a mechanism for the recuperation of marginalized histories. It is loosely organized around three thematic axes: vernacular strategies, indigenous understandings, and shared territories.

The first of these axes is seen in the collaborative and hybridized works of Paolo Soleri, Lina Bo Bardi, and Pierre Verger—European immigrants who incorporated the vernacular into architecture, design, and art. The biennial opens with an installation about the Paolo Soleri Amphitheater in Santa Fe. Commissioned by the Cherokee designer and founder of the Institute of American Indian Arts, Lloyd Kiva New, in 1964, Soleri's theater combines principles of Native American design—chiefly Pueblo ideologies and aesthetics—with those of the Elizabethan theater. Once part of the foremost institution for Native American performing arts education, the earth-cast concrete structure is now abandoned, closed off behind a chain-link fence.

In *Comunicando con tierra* (Communicating with Earth, 1976), **Marta Minujín** envisions the earth as a protective force that unites cultures. In 1971 Minujín visited the sacred Inca site Machu Picchu, where she extracted thirty kilos of earth that she brought back to Buenos Aires for an exhibition. There, she combined five kilos of this earth with

local soil to create the nest of an ovenbird. She then proceeded to mail the rest of the earth to different artists in Central and South America, who in turn mixed it with local soil and returned it to Minujín. In 1976 Minujín came back to Machu Picchu and organized a “ceremony of restitution,” returning the earth to this sacred site in a symbolic gesture of cross-cultural communication and communion. At *SITELines*, Minujín presents documentation of her original project alongside a re-creation of the earthen nest.

Ethnography as an artistic methodology is strongly represented throughout the exhibition in the works of Graciela Iturbide, with her portraits of the Seri peoples of the Sonora desert; Miguel Gandert, who documents the diversity of the New Mexican population; and Pierre Verger, a French historian and ethnographer who photographed the *candomblé* rituals of the Afro-Brazilian peoples of Brazil’s northeast. Abel Rodríguez, a self-taught Nonuya artist from the Colombian Amazon, shares an inventory of native plants from his memory through detailed colored drawings. Rodríguez, who was expelled from his native land by armed militias, makes use of indigenous knowledge—radically different from Western plant taxonomies—to visually organize the natural world.

The valorization of local craft is evident in *Sistah Paradise’s Great Wall of Fire Revival Tent* (1993–ongoing), where Xenobia Bailey recuperates African American vernacular material culture. Using yarn and incorporating funk aesthetics, Bailey has created a revival tent: that temporary and informal structure once commonly erected in rural parts of the United States. These tents functioned as religious gathering spaces, interracial spaces, and in some cases meeting spots for slave rebellions. Carla Fernández and Jorge González also research and utilize indigenous knowledge to create functional textile objects in collaboration with local artisans. In both of their projects, the authorial distinction between artist and artisan is blurred. Meanwhile, Juana Valdes tackles racial, gender, and class categories in *Sienna Colored China Rags* (2012). Valdes shapes porcelain into delicate sculptures using an ordinary washrag as a mold. Porcelain—usually noted for its whiteness—here is altered by Valdes into flesh tones, from pink-cream to dark brown, calling forth the bodies of immigrant women whose first work often consists of housecleaning.

With five curators and only thirty-five artists, ideas cross over between the different spaces, contracting and expanding throughout the show. But despite the collaborative ethos of the presentation—a decolonial work approach that aims to break down vertical power relations—each curator’s perspective is clearly defined in space; for viewers familiar with their individual practices, there seem to be invisible borderlines between them. That said, a utopic thread runs throughout the exhibition—one that affirms that borders, although discernible, are nonetheless artificial. While it is true that neoliberal structures require and have facilitated transnational mobility, who owns the privilege to

freely cross borders? In a time when mobility is restricted for many—notably political refugees and unwanted immigrants—and when borders are being not only maintained but also reinforced, it is crucial to think of them as actual barriers and not artificial ones. Developing an immigrant consciousness doesn't necessarily negate the existence of borders, but rather recognizes the difficulty of transcending them.

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