

# Art in America

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## REPORT FROM SANTA FE

### A Roll of the Dice

*In the latest installment of SITE Santa Fe, curator Lance Fung stakes a bet on emerging artists from around the world.*

BY CHARLES DEE MITCHELL

“Searching for a Meta-Biennial” is the title curator Lance Fung gave his introductory essay to the catalogue for “Lucky Number Seven,” SITE Santa Fe’s current biennial exhibition, on view through Jan. 4. My first thought when I read the “meta-biennial” phrase was that the curator was giving himself considerable wiggle room. You can pretty well define such an animal however you want. But in press materials Fung is, if not much more specific, much more engaging. In describing the project, he says he wanted an exhibition that would be “intimate, rigorous yet playful, that bridges audiences in a spirit of discovery and learning.” That still leaves things pretty open-ended, but one can sense Fung stepping away from the standard approach to these international extravaganzas. In the usual formula, a high-profile curator calls up friends and calls in favors, drawing from an increasingly familiar roster of art stars known to deliver a dependable product for an opening-weekend, globe-trotting crowd. The resulting exhibitions—several of SITE Santa Fe’s previous incarnations among them—are often given titles opaque enough to validate almost any choice of artists the curator makes.

“Meta-biennial” may be as vague a concept as you can get, but Fung brought considerable rigor to its realization. And as a title, “Lucky Number Seven” is

more playful than opaque. This is, in fact, number seven of SITE Santa Fe’s biennials—and the gambling metaphor is not too farfetched. Although the city itself is not a gaming destination, the surrounding region offers several reservation casinos. Fung was ready to wager. He wanted to take a chance with this biennial, and, as with any throw of the dice, he knew there was the possibility of coming up snake eyes. At an early meeting with SITE’s trustees he offered this somewhat unnerving scenario: “I told them that if all the artists come here and decide to blow up balloons, and we documented that in the catalog, that would be success enough for me.”<sup>1</sup>

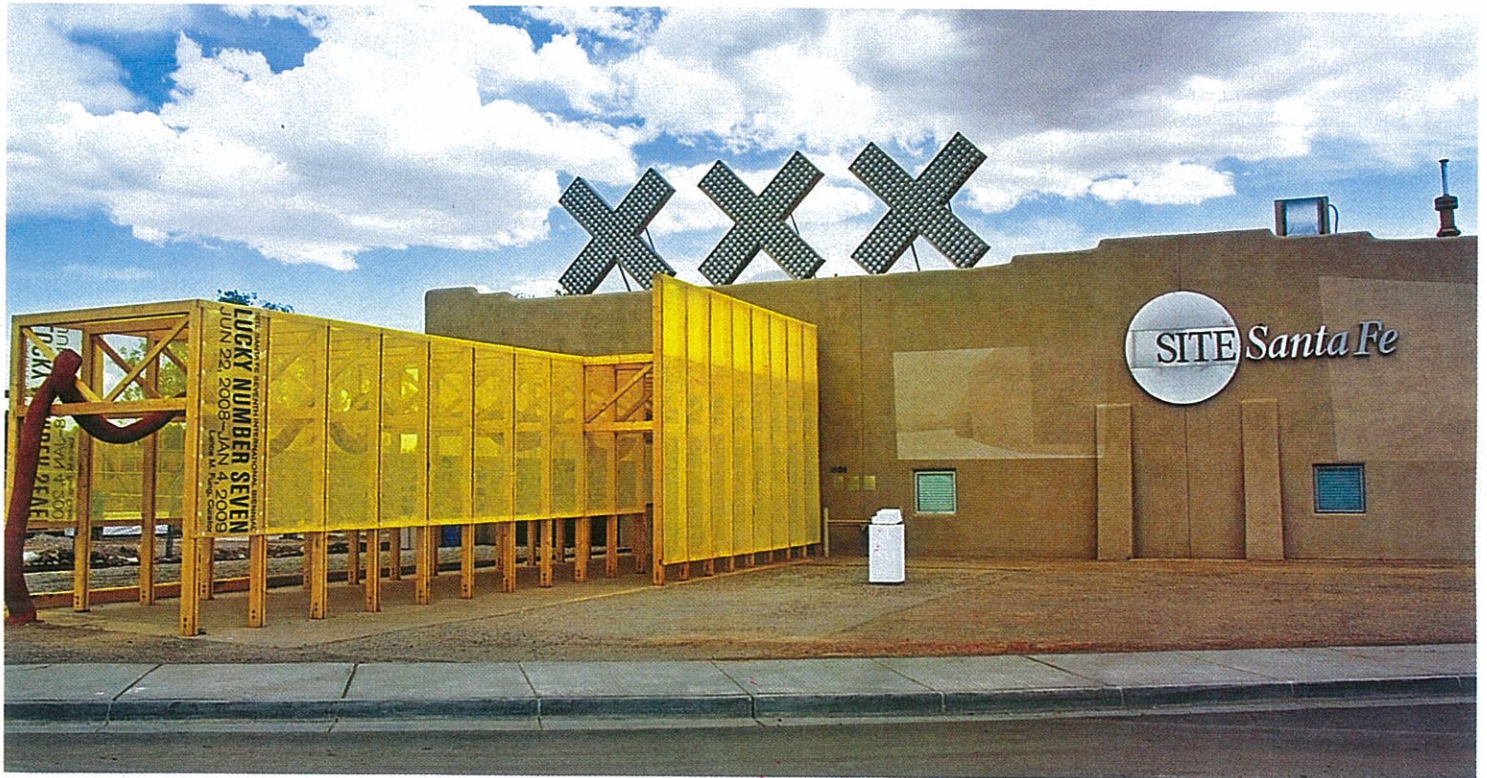
In the end, of course, he got considerably more than a warehouse full of balloons. Fung is, after all, the man who convinced an impressive lineup of A-list artists and architects to travel to the far north of Finland in 2004 to produce works made entirely from snow and ice. The collaborative spirit of “The Snow Show” carried over as a foundational premise of “Lucky Number Seven.” In establishing what he calls a “network of curatorial partners,”<sup>2</sup> Fung contacted institutions around the world that are in sync with the mandate of SITE Santa Fe: noncollecting, not-for-profit organizations with extensive community involvement and an exhibition program drawing on both local and international art. Settling on 18

institutions, he asked each to nominate three to five artists, and from that list he made the final selection of 22 participants for “Lucky Number Seven.” The institutions had been instructed to name only emerging artists, and Fung reports that he was familiar with none of them beforehand.

Once selected, the participants were given minimal but rather inflexible guidelines. All the works were to be new commissions made in Santa Fe and in some sense inspired by the locale. The production budget for each artist was \$7,500, and all the work was to be ephemeral: no finished pieces would enter the market after the run of the exhibition. (One artist who could not work within the fee withdrew; others who were coming in under budget offered the surplus to those facing overruns.)

In January 2008, the artists met as a group for a weeklong immersion in the northern New Mexico scene. The schedule included a hectic round of group dinners and tours of local sites, private homes and cultural institutions, of which there are many. A mere week of this sort of thing may seem like a recipe for superficiality, and there have been previous SITE biennials in which artists “dealt with” Santa Fe in high-handed or uncomprehending ways. But this group of artists, who did not have to finalize their proposals until mid-April, brought to their

*View of SITE Santa Fe facade with (roof) Nadine Robinson’s Tri-Christus, 2008, light fixtures, and (right, next to yellow exhibition entrance) Michal Budny’s Slideshow, 2008, fake slide projector and trompe l’oeil mural.*







*View of Mandla Reuter's Fourth Wall, 2008, electric cable installation; the canvas bag section of Ahmet Ogüt's Clear Blue Sky versus Generous Earth, 2008; and Eliza Naranjo Morse, Nora Naranjo Morse and Rose B. Simpson's Story Line, 2008, clay, willows and mixed mediums.*

projects a well-informed awareness of the place that was alternately humorous, analytical and respectful, and always genuinely engaged. The fabrication and installation process lasted between three and five weeks, depending on the project, and was executed with the help of 30 MFA candidates who had applied for internships and 50 volunteers from the local art community. One guesses that the latter group must have provided a running commentary on the minutiae of life in Santa Fe, local attitudes and other insider information—evidence of which made its way into what is now on view both at the SITE warehouse (the principal location for the exhibitions) and at a dozen or more locations scattered across the city. Among these are restaurants, the parking lot of the Sante Fe Opera and the lobby of the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum.

To redesign the SITE warehouse, Fung brought in the architectural team of Tod Williams and Billie Tsien, who are perhaps best known for their design of the American Folk Art Museum in New York. The existing SITE warehouse encompasses everything from cavernous or hallwaylike rooms to spaces that make you feel like you have possibly gone the wrong way and found yourself in a service area. To negotiate this interior, the architects



*Visitor jumping from Piero Golia's Manifest Destiny, 2008, ramp and stunt mattresses.*



designed a raised ramp that zigzags through the building like a lightning bolt. With several access points, the ramp offers some surprising, distanced views of work that you can later explore on ground level, but on my first encounter with the structure, I found it both bland and somewhat confusing; to me it provided no sense of occasion upon entering the exhibition. The switchback structure of the ramp, which rises up one side of the front gallery and leads into other parts of the warehouse, reminds me of the kind of crowd-control devices found at theme parks. At the back wall of the front gallery, you can descend from the ramp through tiered rows resembling stadium seating—apparently for presentations, though none took place during opening weekend.

Two works run along the ceiling of this first gallery. One consists of bundled electrical cords installed by South African-born, German-based artist Mandla Reuter, which dead-ends in a box in a back gallery. Apparently nonfunctional, it feeds off the Santa Fe power grid and is said to contain enough power to run a small amusement park. (Here, as with many of the projects in “Lucky Number Seven,” viewers require a good deal of backstory—which is not always available.) The other ceiling piece is *Story Line*, a work by Eliza Naranjo Morse, Nora Naranjo Morse and Rose B. Simpson, a mother, daughter and niece from the Santa Clara Pueblo. Made of panty hose, quilt batting, rice and the mud used for clay vessels,

and irregularly bulging, it looks rather like a giant snake digesting a recent meal. *Story Line* begins outside the warehouse, draping itself across a covered entryway before entering the building. Its flat brown coloration is supposed to tie the work to the earth, but its organicism comes off as unpleasantly intestinal, and it fails to establish a creative tension with the pristine whiteness of the room. The space is otherwise empty, except for, along the walls, a dozen or so small flat-screen monitors showing videos of the artists discussing their projects. You have just entered the first gallery of a major exhibition, but you feel as though you are still waiting for the show to begin.

By contrast, Piero Golia, an Italian artist living in California, has found the perfect use for the ramp, removing the barrier from one end and inviting attendees to take a leap—after, of course, signing an insurance waiver. The drop, onto cushions used for stunt work in films, is about 5 feet. Golia’s original plan for a 16-foot jump was nixed even before the insurance adjusters got hold of it because of the limitations of ceiling heights. Five feet is not all that high, and I made the leap in the interest of journalistic thoroughness. My back hurt for three days. But Golia’s work is a witty reminder that we attend these events for “an experience,” one we don’t expect to get anywhere else.

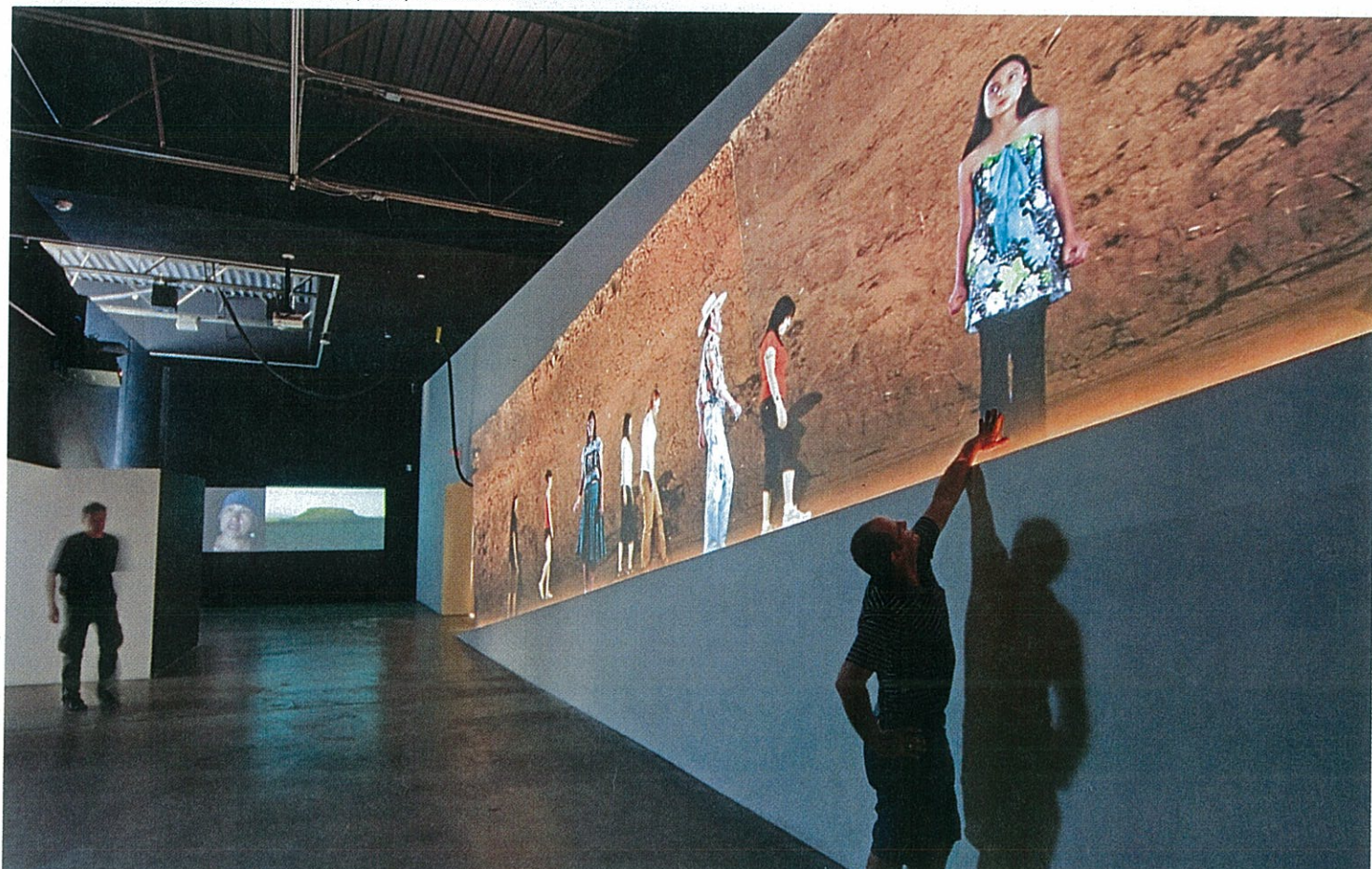
In that spirit, artists took to the streets and countryside to see what they could find. Shi Qing, a Mongo-

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lian now based in Beijing, made food—an important aspect of life in Santa Fe—the focus of his work. He brought with him a Mongolian chef who took over the kitchen of a local Mexican restaurant and attempted to create Mongolian dishes with the spices, produce and meats available in the Santa Fe region. Reports from artists and installation crews who were given the chance to partake of these meals were most enthusiastic and, for the opening gala, VIPs participated in a ritual devised by Shi involving small glasses of an unidentified clear liquid, presumably alcoholic, and a roast lamb. During the run of the show, however, only a video of the chef at work in both Mongolia and the Santa Fe kitchen is available to visitors.

The local topography, which is so central to the

View of Studio Azzurro’s *The Fourth Ladder*, 2008, interactive video installation.







Partial view of Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni's *The Abduction*, 2008, bronze sculpture, color photograph. All photos this article Bayareaeventphotography.com.

**That alien activity in New Mexico is associated not with Santa Fe but with Roswell, 200 miles to the south, is the sort of fine point we cannot expect European artists to concern themselves with.**

but the pottery appeared to be ca. 1960. The artist even took out a notice in the local paper asking for the return of materials that might have been removed from the site. Mangan's fiction is so complete that some of his assistants who spoke limited English thought they were working on an actual site. And it is convincing—as is much of the modern historical reconstruction of Santa Fe, a city sometimes referred to as a Disneyland for adults.

Egyptian artist Wael Shawky broke through the Three Cultures by introducing one or two of his own. In a large gallery he presented videos that included a heavy metal concert performed for a nonplussed Bedouin audience and an English lesson taught to Bedouin children. The sense of the absurdity that can arise when different cultures are forced to interact was enhanced, perhaps unintentionally, by the fact that the videos were displayed in a space at SITE—the largest room available—that was also being used during openings as a bar and buffet. Partygoers looking for the smoked salmon and the open bar seemed as out of place as the heavy metal band in the Bedouin village.

Notwithstanding some of Fung's almost boosterish rhetoric, the crowd supporting SITE and the international spirit it brings to Santa Fe is hardly integrated into the local community. A sense of “us and them” is prevalent, a fact that Bulgarian artist Luchezar Boyadjev takes to a pranksterish level. On an unobtrusive section of the warehouse wall, he has installed 77 \$10 bills, each labeled with a name that he selected from the Santa Fe phonebook for reasons he kept to himself. None of the people were contacted, but if they happen into the exhibition and come upon their names, they can collect the \$10 and read a secret message underneath. Santa Fe has a population of 65,000, so the odds are not great that this will happen. But strangely enough, on the opening night someone found her name and collected her 10 bucks. The message read, “Who is the Fe in Santa Fe?”

Some artists went beyond the city limits to explore phenomena that visitors to the area seem always to find irresistible: the atomic bomb and space aliens. Los Alamos, only a few miles away, inspired Ahmet Ogüt from Turkey to address the disastrous consequences of things unexpectedly falling from the sky and the impossibility of preparing for such happenstance. Learning airbrush techniques from area lowriders, Ogüt illustrated the hood of a car with a Turkish urban legend about a Japanese fishing boat sunk by a cow that

experience of Santa Fe, gets short shrift in the show, although the single landscape-oriented work is by far the most technologically sophisticated piece, coming closer to the kind of showstopper grandness one associates with biennials. Studio Azzurro, a Milanese collective working in new media since 1982, produced a wall projection that screens in one of the warehouse's corridorlike galleries. The projection shows dozens of individuals proceeding up a ramp, an effect created simply by slightly tilting the camera and having participants walk against the rotation of a conveyor belt. The work is titled *The Fourth Ladder* after the Hopi concept that human beings move between worlds on ladders, according to which we are presently on the fourth ladder moving toward the fifth. When you touch certain of these projected people, they stop, turn to face you and speak. (I was given the layman's version of how this worked, but I could not begin to understand what I was being told.) The people, strangers the artists approached around the city, were asked for directions to a place they find “special.” When activated, they give their directions, and when you break contact with the image, they continue on their way, vanishing at the top of the ramp. At the far end of the hallway, the

participants reappear in side-by-side wall projections. On one side, they are seen discussing their chosen locale in greater detail, while on the other, images of that place unfold. More than any other work in the biennial, *The Fourth Ladder* embodies the sense of community Fung sought to encourage.

**Y**ou hear much talk in Santa Fe about the “Three Cultures”—Native American, Hispanic and Anglo—a theme that weaves through “Lucky Number Seven.” The Three Cultures idea can be politically volatile, but some of the emerging artists here—perhaps feeling they had little to lose—had a lot of fun with it. For example, Nick Mangan, from Australia, responded to the blur between reality and fiction he found in Santa Fe by creating a fake but pitch-perfect archeological dig in the abandoned quarters of the A-1 Southwest Stone Company. Mangan claims that, in preparing to “demolish” the building, he came across evidence of ancient Indian habitation. State law mandates that, in such cases, all work stop until the site is thoroughly explored, so Mangan gridded the site and built into his “dig” purportedly ancient foundation stones and pottery shards. The foundation stones were pretty authentic-looking,



fell from a Russian convoy plane. He also created canvas bags that visitors can take away labeled with official advisories issued by the U.S. government in the 1950s. "LOOSEN NECKTIE, UNBUT-TON COAT AND OTHER RESTRICTIVE CLOTH-ING" is the hands-down favorite.

Perhaps the most complicated project is a spotlight bronze sculpture on a revolving platform, which at first looks like the kind of technically proficient kitsch object seen in the hundreds along Santa Fe's Canyon Road. French artists Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni persuaded the proprietor of Mountain Trails Gallery to lend them a cast-bronze sculpture, *Navajo Rollercoaster*, by an established local artist named Ed Natiya. They explained that they planned to melt it down, recasting it as a new work. This would be displayed at SITE Santa Fe—an institution the personnel at Mountain Trails had, incidentally, never heard of. The artists would then have it recast into its original form and returned. In a testament, perhaps, to the persuasiveness of a French accent, the dealer and artist agreed. *Navajo Rollercoaster*, which Giraud and Siboni profess to like (and I am not going to put myself in a position of doubting their sincerity), depicts a group of Navajo children riding a horse bareback down a precipitous incline. (A photograph of the original is pictured in the gallery

at SITE.) The new version, according to the artists, presents the aftermath of an alien abduction. That alien activity in New Mexico is associated not with Santa Fe but with Roswell, 200 miles to the south, is the sort of fine point we cannot expect European artists to concern themselves with. The horse has collapsed and shows signs of mutilation. The boys' pants are down around their ankles, possible evidence of anal probes, and one young girl has climbed back up the hillside and waves toward the sky, perhaps beckoning the alien ship to come back. The artists say that when the work is recast, one of the original figures will be missing from the ensemble. How well this post-abduction transformation will sit with the dealer and artist has yet to be seen.

Giraud and Siboni's project may seem like little more than delightfully fruitless labor, but it also sums up what it means to drop people into an alien culture. Everyone has taken a tumble. Some may seem bewildered, but at least one, that little girl, has crawled back up the embankment to ask for more. I get the feeling that this range of experiences is more or less what Fung was hoping for in "Lucky Number Seven," and to a large extent he has succeeded. Not that anyone has asked, but I have an opinion about the best direction this constantly evolving biennial could take: let "Lucky Number Seven" be the begin-


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ning of a trend, in which young curators like Lance Fung continue to use SITE Santa Fe as a springboard for fresh ideas. □

1. "Welcome to New Mexico. Now Create," *New York Times*, Jan. 27, 2008, p. 32.
2. Lance Fung, "Searching for a Meta-Biennial," *Lucky Number Seven*, Santa Fe, SITE Santa Fe, 2008, p. 31.

*"Lucky Number Seven," the 7th SITE Santa Fe Biennial, is on view June 22, 2008-Jan. 4, 2009.*

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Image: Carlos Cruz-Diez, *Laberinto de Cromosaturación y Paseo Cromático*, 1969.  
Public Intervention, Odeon Metro Station, Paris. Image courtesy of the Atelier Cruz-Diez, Paris.

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