What’s Past is Prologue: 
el corno emplumado at SITE Santa Fe 

by Elaine Ritchel

In the summer of 1961, poet Margaret Randall boarded a Greyhound bus bound for Mexico City with her ten-month-old son. Behind her, New York City pulsed, a vortex of jazz, poetry, and abstract expressionism. Randall had been in the thick of it, but a lack of facilities for children and support for single mothers spurred her to seek a better life for her and her son. Ahead of her, Mexico City promised societal warmth, a love for children, and cultural vibrancy. “I had phone numbers for a few people, but that was all, really,” she remembers. “And it was a great move for me.”

Among Randall’s few contacts in Mexico City was Philip Lamantia, an American poet whose apartment had become a center for cultural exchange. There, Randall brushed elbows with Latin and South American poets such as Ernesto Cardenal, Juan Bañuelos, and Raquel Jodorowsky. And just a few months after her arrival, she would launch El Corno Emplumado (The Plumed Horn), a quarterly bilingual poetry journal established to connect writers across the continent—and later around the world—through literature. This year, SITE Santa Fe honors El Corno’s pioneering efforts with an installation in much wider than a line, the second installment of SITElines, its biennial series focusing on art in the Americas.

For Randall, attending those informal poetry salons at Lamantia’s was pivotal. “It was a little young to have felt the direct influence of McCarthyism, but I did suffer its aftereffects,” she explains. “In the United States, the sense was that if you wanted to be a poet—if you wanted to get grants, be published in magazines—you couldn’t write about social problems or anything political. It really reduced what poets, except for the Beats, were writing about. Going to Mexico as a young, very incipient poet just immediately opened me up. Listening to Latin American and Mexican poets showed me that you could write about anything.”

As the poets read aloud to each other, one in English, another in Spanish, their delivery punctuated by hasty translations when necessary, Randall realized that there was far more than language hindering literary exchange between the Americas. Though neighbors, these poets didn’t know each other’s cultures. They didn’t know each other’s mentors. At the time, both North and South American poets looked to Europe, to Artaud and Rimbaud, and to literary giants closer to home, such as Pound and Neruda respectively. There was a huge gap in understanding. “That was the impetus to do the magazine. To create a place, a venue, where we could publish each other’s work, where we could publish good translations, where we could facilitate this conversation we felt a need for on both sides,” says Randall.

Mexican poet Sergio Mondragón joined forces with Randall as co-editor of the journal. American poet Harvey Wolin, who helped launch the first issue, thought up a fitting name: El Corno Emplumado married the feathers of Quetzalcoat with the jazz horn, signaling a cultural alliance. In January of 1962, El Corno debuted, its title repeated across a crimson cover like a mantric call to arms. Below, the names of contributors followed, a literary roll call. This graphic style, which Randall looks back on as rather clunky, became iconic as subsequent issues followed.

Randall and Mondragón recruited international poet-couriers, who distributed the publication and gathered contributions. By the second issue, submissions, letters, and drawings were rolling in from writers, artists, and political figures from all over the world. Octavio Paz, Elaine de Kooning, Allen Ginsberg, and Salvador Dalí are just a few of the big names emblazoned on El Corno’s covers. “We were part of this worldwide movement of rebellion in the arts and beyond the arts,” says Randall. “And we were very eclectic. Most of the other magazines were created by a group and centered on that group. We didn’t want to be part of a school. We published all kinds of poetry by all kinds of people, including indigenous poets and working class poets. Our only criteria was that we thought the work was good.”

Occasionally entire issues were devoted to a particular theme or region. El Corno Emplumado 23, for example, which is on view at SITE, was dedicated to Cuba. “That was a tremendously influential issue, because in the United States at the time, everything about Cuba was blacked out. There was no Cuban literature [available],” remembers Randall. “As a matter of fact, the Pan-American Union had just taken out five hundred subscriptions of the magazine, which was a tremendous gift to us. But they told us that if we decided to publish this Cuban issue, they would cancel their subscriptions, and they did. I mean, we didn’t think twice, because we weren’t going to cancel that issue!”

After seven years and thirty-one issues, El Corno Emplumado was forced to cease activity. Like many small publications and arts groups, it had taken the side of the students in the Student Movement of 1968, which culminated in a massacre on Mexico City’s Tlatelolco Plaza. Funds from the Mexican government immediately stopped rolling in, but due to continuing support from the United States, Randall and Robert Cohen, who replaced Mondragón as co-editor during El Corno’s last year, managed to publish a few more issues.

The final blow came just three months after Randall had her fourth child, when her apartment was raided and her passport stolen by armed paramilitary operatives. Randall and Cohen went underground, eventually emigrating to Cuba. The two discussed reviving El Corno there, but because the country was so isolated and already had notable literary journals, they felt that their energies were better spent working from within the revolution to help build a new society.

Despite its abrupt end, El Corno has continued to intrigue writers and scholars all over the world. In 2005, Danish filmmakers released a documentary about it. Last year, a conference dedicated to El Corno took place in Mexico City, at the Tlatelolco Cultural Center. Young poets often tell Randall that the journal has inspired their own projects, and inquiries about it frequently land in her inbox.

The choice to include El Corno Emplumado in
much wider than a line was that of curator Pablo León de la Barra, in an effort to dialogue with disciplines that engage with, inform, and are informed by visual art practices. For the installation, pages from the journal have been enlarged and adhered directly onto two perpendicular walls, creating an El Corno corner that envelops visitors who step in to take a closer look. While the visual impact of the selection as a whole is immediate, spending time with the individual pages reveals the typographic choices, drawings, poems, and letters by notable authors that made El Corno so remarkable.

Below these pages, a vitrine displays the vibrant spectrum of all thirty-one issues. On the adjacent wall hangs a small shelf holding copies of four different issues that visitors may leaf through. Hammock stools created by San Juan–based artist and designer Jorge González invite you to take a seat. Fittingly, the stools made an appearance at a poetry reading at the University of Puerto Rico before González shipped them to Santa Fe.

This installation, though simple, gives life to the sort of documents that are typically relegated to being supporting or supplemental in exhibitions of visual art. El Corno Emplumado certainly provides a wealth of archival research material, but its conceptual and aesthetic presence is also worth commemorating. Located near the beginning of much wider than a line, just after an homage to the Paolo Soleri Amphitheater, the installation provides a framework, or perhaps a sentiment, through which to explore the rest of the exhibition. “It was all a surprise to me, and I was thrilled with it,” says Randall of the installation. “I think they considered [me and Soleri] elders—just honoring, in a sense, that we had these ideas long before these ideas existed in the art world.”

Randall, who lives in Albuquerque with her wife, painter Barbara Byers, continues to forge cross-cultural connections through her work as a writer and editor. In the next year, she will publish five books, one of which is an anthology of Cuban poetry that she edited and translated. Only the Road/Solo El Camino: Eight Decades of Cuban Poetry is due out this fall, nearly fifty years after the publication of influential El Corno Emplumado 23. SITE Santa Fe will host a book launch and reading by Randall on November 15.

“It must be that the world needs this now,” she says, reflecting on recent interest in her work and the journal she founded. “Not that it just needs El Corno, but that it needs this kind of expression. Maybe it has to do with the fact that we really were about connection, and there is so much disconnection now. We embodied the opposite.”


left: Margaret Randall, photo: Chris Felver.
below: SITElines.2016: much wider than a line, installation view, showing El Corno Emplumado, edited by Margaret Randall. Photo: Eric Swanson. Image courtesy SITE Santa Fe.