AS PART OF THE PERFORMANCE WORK THAT PAOLO NAZARETH HAS DONE IN THE PAST, THE
artist walked from Bolo Horizonte, in Brazil, where he lives, to the Hudson River in New York in a six-month project titled News from America. He has also walked from Cape Town to the north of Africa in an effort to investigate part of his biological heritage—Nazareth is Caucasian, African, and indigenous South American. During the opening of much wider than a line (through January 8, 2017), the artist discussed his plans to travel in the Southwest and collect stories about the impact of nuclear testing on this area. Nazareth’s practice is dramatic and penetrating, and while his work seems a perfect entry point into SITE’s new biennial, the quest to understand its overall themes could, however, have begun with any of the artists in the exhibition and their attempts to grapple with their places in the world in the shadow of the dominant culture. There are thirty-five participants, two of whom are research and archival contributors: Margaret Randall, from Albuquerque, a well-known poet and publisher of the legendary bilingual magazine El Corno Emplumado; and Conrad Skinner, a Santa Fe–based architect who has organized visual and textual information about the Paolo Soleri Amphitheater, a famous structural landmark built primarily in the spirit of, and for, Native American cultural events, but is now on its way to being demolished.

In its own way, every project in the biennial is a kind of all-encompassing blanket thrown over the themes of this biennial, the second of five in the series “SITElines: New Perspectives on Art of the Americas”—a massive multivalent undertaking whose goal is to reinterpret multicultural relationships that have arisen from these vast territories. This series is an advanced course, if you will, in identity politics investigated in always surprising and inventive configurations. Consequently, all the work in much wider than a line is related in various ways—by familiar cries, chants, practices, narratives, images, poetry, objects, and conceptual investigations that are, in the end, all strands of one thick visionary braid from our collective human head. And the work as a whole pushes against a history of colonization and exploitation in the Americas as familiar sources of inverse inspiration.

Walking through the exhibition, it often feels like you are on a journey designed by a large group of brothers and sisters separated at birth. Nature and nurture have spun their recombinant DNA to keep this family recognizable to one another while the various projects—sculpture, photographs, textiles, video, performance, musical composition, documentation, installation—turn away from, yet ultimately toward, each other. I felt I was on one long pilgrimage route trying to understand pan-American identity crises fused with time-honored rituals and ways of life experienced through eyes that take nothing about the contemporary world for granted. For this reason, Nazareth’s investigation into the history of nuclear testing in the Southwest is, to me, a pivot point both historically and philosophically. The dawn of the Atomic Age marks the before and after of recorded time—a critical mass attained that now unites everyone on the planet, and yet also seems like such a sharp dividing line between indigenous concerns for cultural survival and postmodern irony, social frivolity, reckless consumption, and the dominant society’s endless squandering of resources.

What unites all the work in this exhibition is this invisible thread of social and cultural deconstruction, while the work also rests on a fulcrum of the sensuous. The botanical illustrations of Abel Rodriguez can be contrasted to the actual pine tree of Aaron Dysart in his installation Second Growth, suggesting that the tree has burst through a wall and is reaching its living branches to the light pouring in from above. Lewis deSoto’s
photographs posit a sterile view of Southern California’s over-developed Inland Empire, images devoid of people, though the land is clearly inhabited. This haunted vision of America is in contrast to Jonathas de Andrade’s project—a series of portraits of Santa Fe residents called A Study of Race and Class—a title that is like a needle threading one of the biennial’s vital threads. These individuals in the photographs represent neighbors, friends, relatives, people spotted briefly on the street, the knowns and unknowns in our diverse community.

In 1936, the French surrealist writer and dramatist Antonin Artaud came to Mexico in order to study peyote rituals of the Tarahumara Indians, and wrote A Voyage to the Land of the Tarahumara in 1947 while interned in a French insane asylum. To Have Done with the Judgment of God is the name of a video that Javier Téllez made, basing it on a radio play that Artaud wrote. Téllez’s video retraces Artaud’s “psychonautic” adventure with the Tarahumara, now known as the Rarámuri. In this stunning video, we see the Rarámuri situated within a rugged desert landscape and the stark simplicity of their life, while they are also looping in an eccentric orbit that encompasses an eighty-year trajectory. The narrative travels through the record of Artaud’s visit to this unchanging landscape and its native people alongside a transmission that comes from a modern radio station not too far away, with its satellite dishes on top and a radio console operated by a technician in indigenous clothes who controls the broadcast.

As it explores daily life and powerful scenery, the looping backwards and forwards in Téllez’s video eventually comes to rest on a documentation of the peyote ceremony that Artaud came to study. Throughout is the bizarre text of the writer, his evident derangement leaking through the words, and the psychotic screaming that occasionally takes over—fits of madness projected against the extraterrestrial rock formations that appear like sentinels of time and light and life and dark despair.

This biennial is steeped in many things: issues of race and class. Now and then. Here and there. Artifacts and artifice. Life on the edge and life being invented in ingenious ways. We see the re-threading of rituals enacted in a baroque style with Jeffrey Gibson in his cloak of many colors and metallic sounds; or there is the opposite of that fancy-dancer overkill that one witnesses in Maria Hupfield’s video It Is Never Just About Sustenance or Pleasure, where her performance is more like a slow and delicately clinking walk through marshland with tribal garments on. However, her clothes are deliberately designed as cultural fakes. The sculptures of Sonya Kelliher-Combs are both artifacts and artifice joined together: shallow boxes on the wall containing things like caribou antlers, human hair, bird wings, a moose jaw bone, a seal intestine—each object partly obscured by a translucent skin of acrylic polymer.

The artist’s exhibition room is like a cabinet of wonders where the world of nature meets visual poetry.

Juana Valdes created visual poetry of a different sort, hers with literal words in the print series Pulling at Me—a Thread, with its spare text repeated in nine combinations. The first print begins with, “It’s about hanging by a nail/ by a thread/by the skin of your teeth,” and the last print reads, “It’s your skin.” White embossed words on white paper—it’s an almost subliminal song, barely perceptible but wholly present, its metaphysical message underlying the thematic underpinnings of much wider than a line. This sentiment haunts our contemporary world because we are all hanging on to the complex social changes, apocalyptic climate warnings, and global paradigmatic shifts by the skin of our teeth. This message is there in all its vivid permutations—but then again, this is the philosophical ground of contemporary art and its infinite expressions. It is all a matter of contemplation being interrupted by action. And to quote the late artist Hanne Darboven: making art from the circumstances of our lives means “accepting anything among everything.” And so, new strategies of being begin again in the Americas, and then again.

—Diane Armitage