

## Santa Fe

*much wider than a line: SITElines.2016; New Perspectives on Arts of the Americas*

SITE Santa Fe

**T**HE SECOND INSTALLMENT of a series of three biennials focused on contemporary arts of the Americas, *much wider than a line: SITElines.2016* (July 16, 2016–January 8, 2017) feels like a winding river with an endless number of tributaries that await courageous audiences. For those who submerge themselves into these knowledge-bearing waters, a decided path through the biennial does not exist. This is because *much wider than a line* is thematically organized after the indigenized design of the Paolo Soleri Amphitheater (1970–2010), a now-dormant space commissioned by Lloyd Kiva New (Cherokee, 1916–2002) in 1965 for the Institute of American Indian Arts on the former Santa Fe Indian School campus. As such, beyond SITE Santa Fe’s initial galleries, one must chart a path through this mosaic of sensory expressions that signify the ongoing overlapping of communities in the Americas. The biennial takes “the border” as its point of departure and activates a space of resistance against the displacement of past, present, and future histories by imposed boundaries.

This central theme is articulated by three curatorial guideposts: “Vernacular Strategies,” “Indigenous Understandings,” and “Shared Territories,” embodied in works by 33 artists. Curated by Rocío Aranda-Alvarado (Chilean), Kathleen Ash-Milby (Diné), Pip Day (British), Pablo León de la Barra (Mexican), and Kiki Mazzucchelli (Brazilian), *much wider than a line* gives voice to the influx and malleable particularities of culture with a constant emphasis on unexpected materiality and dialogical

performance, present in all of the artworks on display. In this biennial, the artists embrace the trope of “being exhibited” on the gallery stage and use the spotlight to directly confront the multitude of ways selfhood and community are defined.

In *Remnant* (2016), a commissioned work for the biennial, Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Inupiaq-Athabascan) speaks to the artificiality and constrained quality of natural-history museum specimen cases through her replacement of clear glass with yellow-brown, soft acrylic covers. An entire room installation, this body of work features a series of isolated “artifacts,” each one individually encased in a wall-mounted shadow box. The objects under examination—revealing as much as Kelliher-Combs allows viewers to see—speak to humans’ inherent reliance on nature and the artificial. Moreover, the artist visually expresses the tension in these relationships through her inclusion of tautly covered, “suffocated” objects, where the materials press against the acrylic surface to simultaneously pierce the picture plane and visually reject normative display methodologies. Kelliher-Combs features framed antlers, braids of human hair, quills, bones, feathers, and walrus intestines, among other potent remnants of place and culture. Through an inversion of the concept of artificial transparency in museal display, the artist puts forth an Indigenized narrative that disrupts many Western notions of “exhibition.” Kelliher-Combs’ use of the semitranslucent, acrylic skin as a visual metaphor suggests that the identities of subjects on display cannot be fully known through the typical glass-box spectacle of fragmentary remnants.

Another performer on the biennial stage, Jeffrey Gibson (Choctaw-Cherokee) merges dance, drumming, text, and smoke with pop culture idioms in *Like a Hammer* (2016), a 27:48-minute video. As such, the artist proclaims his heavy heartbeat and plays with this concept by editing his drumbeats to a fast

pace and slyly alluding to the “Indian” drumbeats of Hollywood film. In *Like a Hammer*, Gibson records his memories of movement through careful montage, where he sometimes portrays himself as multiple figures dressed in invented jingle dance regalia. The artist’s headdress covers his face entirely, symbolic of his value of aural, tactile, and olfactory senses over that of sight. During his performance, the artist writes phrases like, “Flirt Like a Fox,” “Jack Like a Rabbit,” and “Horse Power” in oil sticks on paper. He follows each phrase with a dance of honor and, for a moment, transforms into each animal. Gibson’s act of inscribing these words while his sight is impaired demonstrates his trust in experiential knowledge gained through feeling. But, in a trickster move, these pages of oil-stick writings on paper are on display as part of the *Like a Hammer* installation, which also includes Gibson’s regalia. Thus, viewers are encouraged to visually scrutinize the jingle ensemble and scrawled texts—evidence of Gibson’s journey of knowing through being.

A commissioned performance for *much wider than a line*, Maria Hupfield’s (Wasauksing Ojibwe) *It Is Never Just about Sustenance or Pleasure* (2016) is a video recording of her trek through a wooded area near Santa Fe while wearing arm-length mittens and tall boots made of industrial felt over her clothes. Here, Hupfield uses her body as a locus for processing the contradictions between her Great Lakes-oriented felt gear—of which she said the boots were reminiscent of those for Anishinaabe fly-fishing—and the northern New Mexico desert environment. The artist’s actions speak to displacement, migration, and relocation, and the disconnection between many Native cultures’ ancestral homes and the places where they have been forcibly or have circumstantially moved. The liminal space between Hupfield’s clunky attire and the natural environment is one where questions of identity and borders reside. How does one negotiate

their cultural past, present, and future with the physical and sociopolitical landscapes of our time? Hupfield's performance challenges viewers to consider a never-ending struggle: Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies that embody commitments to honoring the land and keeping it healthy, and the ongoing fight for the control of natural resources and Indigenous people by federal governments.

In a sound-based gallery in the biennial, Diné musician Raven Chacon's ongoing work with Native high school students from institutions on the Diné, Hopi, and Salt River Pima-Maricopa reservations is presented to audiences. Part of the Native American Composers Apprenticeship Project (NACAP), this collaboration offers a few students from each school the opportunity to channel a variety of influences into avant-garde compositions, which are then performed by renowned musicians during the annual Grand Canyon Music Festival. This project, of which Chacon is a composer-in-residence, is one of empowerment, with students fusing their influences into aural exhibitions of identity as they know themselves to be in the current moment. Blurring borders of culture, place, and selfhood, the students cull from mainstream music, video games, nature, and anything else they find integral to their lives. From my perspective, some of the song recordings on display in *much wider than a line* cycled through a prism of emotions and evoked wonder, sadness, regret, and calmness. Of course, musical concepts, like visual art, have an uncertain chemistry to them. The blend of the catalyst—the art—with the experiences of each beholder will be unique. More songs were added to the biennial after the Santa Fe Indian School students' NACAP compositions were performed in October at the Armory for the Arts in Santa Fe.

This biennial, managed by Candice Hopkins (Carcross/Tagish),



TOP: **Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Iñupiaq-Athabaskan), *Remnant*** (installation view), 2016, installation, organic and synthetic materials, SITE Santa Fe commission. Both photos: Eric Swanson.

BOTTOM: **Sonya Kelliher-Combs (Iñupiaq-Athabaskan), *Remnant: Caribou Antler*** (detail), 2016, installation, acrylic polymer, caribou antler, organic and synthetic materials, SITE Santa Fe commission.

was commendably provocative. From the start, audiences are thrown into chaos and must use their own judgment to sort their way through *much wider than a line*. The simultaneous waves of spatial confusion, the desire to locate, and ultimately

unresolved feelings speak to the biennial's kaleidoscopic display of peoples of the Americas, who are constantly in motion and coloring their cultures well outside the lines artificially imposed onto this hemisphere.

—Michelle Lanteri