

unsafeArt.com

[return to home](#)

Seventh Biennial at SITE Santa Fe

Communicate, or get Back on the Bus

LUCKY NO. 7 RUNS FROM JUNE 22, 2008 TO JAN. 4, 2009 (OR OCT 26, 2008, I'D CALL FIRST, BASED ON A DISCREPANCY IN THEIR DOCUMENTS.)

SANTA FE, N.M. — Seeing Lucky No. 7, the seventh biennial at SITE Santa Fe, caused two revelations. Revelation One: The Art Tourist is not a privileged viewer, not someone who is on the bus, but an ordinary human who looks at contemporary art, just as most anyone would be going to the show. And Revelation Two: If art is communication between humans (not just the self-absorbed, self-gratifying expression of a person/artist) then it should provide something to any viewer who is open, willing and able to experience it. And what this something is, is what the [Art Tourist](#) tries to say in each of the reviews in this series. The viewer should not have to be *on the bus*.

In January 2008, the public was invited to SITE Santa Fe to meet the artists who were chosen to participate in the biennial. About 20 were present plus curators from many of the 19 contemporary art arenas worldwide who had each suggested one or more of these artists. Biennial Curator Lance Fung had selected the curators, and the final artists.

The artists were introduced like football players (with little information about their work, so I'm not ruining my ability to be the average viewer). As we walked out of the event, the artists, curators and press were carted off on a bus around Santa Fe, and my companion said to me, "We just want to be on the bus," which would have been really fun but have nothing to do with Revelation 2 (what the art communicates to viewers).



Marti and the Floor Factory, was built by Marti Anson on Museum Hill, and is a local issue in his home town in Spain but also reality issues. See more photos at [Art Tourist on Local Art](#).

What this show communicates to us, the well-informed people not on the bus, transpired months later, after the opening in June. When we committed to our own, open-minded trip to see the show that Lance Fung and Company put on, we looked up the show on the Internet before we arrived, we had a map of all the off-SITE locations of artwork, and had watched an interview with four of the artists, Luchezar Boyadjev from Bulgaria, and three women from Santa Clara Pueblo, near Santa Fe. These related women, Rose Simpson and Nora and Eliza Naranjo Morse were the only invitees from the West, and the only Americans save one other, Nadine Robinson, so the question asked in this interview was: what is the importance of local when art is now so global? I didn't get an answer and gave up the pre-trip research. I had a [revelation about local art](#) on the drive, if you want to read it.

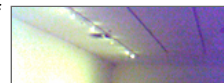
When we approached the door of SITE, the three Native American women had entwined a fat rope along the entrance canopy, over the roof of this long, channeling open structure that lead us to the museum entrance. Walking under this canopy felt a little risky in that the skin of this long undulating rope wasn't continuous but cracked clay that sporadically revealed its insides: a tube of netting filled with straw stretching the netting to various volumes. Local materials in the tradition of Indian crafts, the rope drew us as viewers in and continued through the front wall, over the many white ramps strewn like pixie sticks inside, and disappeared.

When I discovered the end point of the rope, it was decorated with a little comic-book splash. Another decorating element of this otherwise ethereal show were a series of red mesh plastic shopping bags printed with saying that mocked English-language safety warnings by Turkish artist Ahmet Ogut.

SITE is free on Friday, open until 7 and we'd arrived at 6:30pm, so we decided to head to the Plaza and see the off-SITE stuff. We were on the scavenger hunt, to the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, the Art Museum of New Mexico, the Palace of the Governors, but when we got to the spot to get one of the prizes, see the art, officials told us "they took it down Monday." The game was blown. No being discouraged, we went and had fantastic margaritas at the LaFonda, where they have a very nice collection of old paintings.

Next day, we're back at the museum, serious about actually seeing the bulk of the show. I knew the place was chaotically packed with stuff from being in the entry the previous night, but the first thing I walk into is a long, corner-turning line of TV monitors playing a video of each artist invitee. No sound, thankfully, only subtitles, but still assaulting — too many people talking — especially if you truly care what these people are trying to communicate. My companion is pulled to one screen by an image he likes, and I watch the story about artists from the community coming into the gallery and painting a mural on one of the walls. The paint and images are very garish, messy, random communication at best. I give up watching. My companion's TV show was about the artist, Australian Nick Mangan, creating an archeological dig by excavating a closed down industrial business. (We're told to make an appointment to actually see the dig.)

I wandered up a ramp onto an overlook of a room of videos with an old couch on a platform in the center and some notebook paper drawings on the back wall. One video was a rock band performing in front of a crowd of Muslims and some goats, cows and their herders. I don't know how one was supposed to hear the sound (whether I needed to find some headphones or go online) but my guess of the point of this piece was: This is How the Deaf Hear Rock Music, because all you could feel was some bass. Then someone from another video started yelling out a phrase, and a group of school kids repeated it back in unison.



Arabic letters were on the wall of the classroom shown in the visual portion of this yelling/repeating lesson video. I left the overlook.



After the barrage of TV, then the thumping and screaming by video I was feeling very frustrated about actually coming out of this show with a single thought in my head. Later I did think that it would be fun to show the Muslim yelling/repeating lesson side by side with the same rote learning method in an American school. Maybe it would just be kids filling out endless worksheets at the same tempo.

Still up on a ramp in the bowels of the exhibition, I started watching a video projected on a big wall. In the projection, people are walking from left to right up an incline as if on a trail. The background is a red rock wall anyone could find in a sandstone canyon in New Mexico. Bandolier National Park for example.

The walkers' artificiality reminded me of automated computer voices. We're there on a free Saturday, and it's crowded, luckily, because someone in the crowd of viewers below me, walks up to the wall and puts their hand flat on one of the figures walking. (How were we to know to do this?) The image turns and says something as if giving directions to somewhere and there are some simple marks in sand virtually added to the wall in the background. Someone tries to put their hand on another figure and it doesn't do anything, and tries another, and that figure turns and starts playing the guitar and singing. It's interactive, someone says. I hear this kind of unwarranted enthusiasm with dread. I visualize this cheery viewer creating interactive ways to torture me in the future, making me watch or listen to stuff, figure out how to operate something or stall me with off-subject information, when I just want to buy some tickets to something. My companion greeted it this with the same awe/frustration he felt for Pong. I don't mind be bombarded, but never like to be bombarded by worthless content, that's why I prefer a hike at Bandolier to this piece.

In the next room was the graffiti mural that I'd seen on the opening TVs. And it was so lovely, it now looked like hotel art. The artist, Scott Lyall, had taped frames onto the wall before it was painted, and when the muralists were done, he'd stripped off the tape leaving pristine white borders. Then, he covered the whole jumble of images with a 50 percent screen toning down the whole thing, unifying it. Understanding this process (wondering if more things are more interesting if toned down, unified and/or formalized) was more interesting than any of the single images.

I think of political polling, or product surveys: unified, formalized and toned down. Not about individual ideas, not really of any value, the process is what is important. Who is asking the questions, why and how did they do it. My favorite example, of course, is how Karl Rove conducted a survey during the Republican primary in a Carolina in 2000, asking if voters would feel comfortable voting for John McCain if they knew he had fathered a black child. I don't think anyone reported the results. There we go. Thought generated by seeing art.

Okay, this show is worth it, in spite of its assaults. (Lance, if you really want to know more about what was crap, call me, I'll be happy to tell more, but I don't want to turn off my audience.) And here is another one of the reasons why this show was wonderful.

In another gallery set up quite formally, white walls, proper lighting, there sat a pedestal with a two-to-three-foot bronze sculpture atop it. The sculpture looks like a present day carving of kids and a horse in that Western Art bronze look that people still make and sell today although it's message was communicated 150 years ago. But this is not your typical Western Art Gallery bronze of sweet kids and animals. One of the kids has his/her pants around the ankles, another is looking inside his pants, and another is looking through a hole in the horse, which is hollow and positioned as if it had fallen and died. The piece is titled *Abduction*.

On the wall is a photo of a similar, very typical bronze where the kids are riding on the horse joyously down a steep ravine. It is also called *Abduction*. The artists, Frenchmen named Raphael Siboni & Fabien Giraud, borrowed the sculpture from a Santa Fe gallery, pulled a mold from it, manipulated a wax model made from the mold (rearranging the kids in these startling positions, and lying the horse on it's side, flopping off the base, cut the mysterious circular openings (conveniently used for technical casting purposes, as well) like the cows said to be mutilated by aliens. The artists had the original bronze melted and cast it into the new piece and put it back on the original wood base with brass name plaque and pedestal. After the show, they will recast the bronze back into its original form. A fantasy of Santa Fe.

Kids were waiting in line to jump from a high ramp and land on some soft, gymnastic mats below, in a piece by Italian Piero Golia, called *Manifest Destiny*, and I had watched thinking of the colonial maps of American on each kid landing. After a couple of hours inside this museum, I couldn't wait in line to jump, so we were back on the streets of Santa Fe, having forgotten to make an appointment to see the arty archeology, and began our own bombardment by gallery upon gallery selling art. Mentally, I was just looking for a beer.

Terry Talty was the Art Tourist at Site Santa Fe in September of 2008 hoping for contemporary art to do more than a political rally.