

A Site for Thinking Outside the Box

By Blake Gopnik
Washington Post Staff Writer
Sunday, July 6, 2008; M06

SANTA FE, N.M. What would happen if you created a big international art show according to the following rules?

- You refused to choose any artists you had ever heard of.
- You even let others do most of the choosing for you, asking curators from as far afield as Istanbul and Seoul to let you work from a shortlist of their favorite local talent.
- All the work had to be new – conceived, ideally, to respond to the nature of the city where the show was held.
- You gave each artist only \$7,500 for materials – probably one-tenth of what many major artworks cost to make – and ruled out further contributions from their dealers or collectors.
- All the works had to be immaterial (made of sound or light, performance or pure idea) or ephemeral (bound to get eaten or painted over, to crumble or otherwise disintegrate or disappear). Or, if they were painting or sculpture, they had to be disposed of in some noncommercial way after the closing of the show. In other words, your unique exhibition would be designed to fend off the art market instead of feeding it.

The result, it turns out, would be an impressive show full of tension and suspense.

That's what organizer Lance Fung achieved with "Lucky Number Seven," the seventh biennial at the Site Santa Fe art center.

Fung says the show is about the 25 artists who participated, but that's a bit like a scientist ceding credit to the rats who run his mazes.

What makes the exhibition compelling isn't these artists' work – which ranges from pretty good to almost bad – but the series of twists and turns and obstacles that Fung put in their way. Fung has forced himself, his artists and even his viewers into peculiar situations they've never encountered before. Those situations and encounters *are* this show's true art; its objects and installations, good or bad, are a byproduct. That makes this exhibition unlike almost any other you could name.

In the end, "Lucky Number Seven" asks the question "What would happen if . . . ?" rather than "What objects would be nice to see and buy?"

The Site art center occupies a huge white-cube warehouse near the rail yards on the southern edge of downtown. It was founded in 1995 to bring contemporary art – especially in the form of a major international survey – to the city. And in the past 13 years, the Site biennial has made itself into one of this country's most anticipated art events. That's partly because of its outsize ambition. It doesn't simply survey the art scene. It asks notable thinkers – including big names such as curator Robert Storr, now head of Yale's art school, and Dave Hickey, a bad-boy essayist with a radically conservative streak – to come up with a strong argument about which art should be seen, and how. And then, for each show, Site entirely reconfigures its empty space to suit the art on view, often with the help of leading designers.

Fung, a freelance curator and former art dealer, is not nearly as well known as some of his predecessors. So he chose to push Site's ambitions even farther than before. He didn't build his show around a unifying look or theme such as "beauty" (Hickey's) or "the grotesque" (Storr's). Instead, he set up a situation.

Before Fung even knew what art he'd be showing, he got avant-garde architects Tod Williams and Billie Tsien to cut Site's open spaces into angular chambers, built around a giant ramp that zigs and zags around and through and over them. The artists each got an irregular chunk of the fractured space, and so had to cope with visitors coming across their work in peculiar corners and from strange directions.

Nadine Robinson, a New Yorker, coped by sidestepping the architecture's challenges. She stuck her art on the building's roof, like a giant retail sign. Her piece consists of three 10-foot-tall X's, covered in 33,000 watts' worth of light bulbs, advertising the hallowed grounds of art as triple-X entertainment. Robinson's sign is so bright that even in daytime it competes with the famous New Mexico sun. Instead of capitulating to the clichés of Santa Fe's natural beauty, her piece suggests that sex and consumption are the true light of a modern life.

Other artists took their art even farther afield.

Spanish artist Martí Anson occupied an empty parking lot high up on Museum Hill, opposite galleries that house major collections of folk art, Indian art and works left behind by the Spanish. But rather than riffing on the local exotica, as Site artists have done in previous biennials, Anson shipped in a bit of strangeness from the Hispanic motherland. With his own two hands he built a reproduction, in something like one-third scale, of a 19th-century brick flour mill whose preservation was the subject of debate in his home town in Catalonia.

Nick Mangan, an Australian based in Berlin, chose to work in a scruffy corner of Santa Fe known for its drug dealing. Digging under an abandoned workshop – A1 Southwest Stone – and the empty plot next door, he crafted a stunningly accurate, deadpan facsimile of an archaeological excavation. (Mangan went so far as to publish ads in the local newspaper asking for the return of looted artifacts that had never been there in the first place.) Instead of pretending to engage New Mexico's true history, he used made-up archaeology to comment on how others attempt such engagement. Outsiders are always hoping to find something better, something older underneath New Mexico's impoverished reality. Mangan's piece stands for that empty hope.

But maybe the most truly courageous of this biennial's artists were those who stayed at home at Site, despite the architecture's challenges. They saw the eccentric spaces as something to push back against rather than to cope with or even to ignore.

Rose Simpson and Eliza and Nora Morse, a family of native New Mexicans from the Santa Clara Pueblo, threaded a long snake of manure-brown clay through the building's front gallery, touching down with a splat. "They did a big [bowel movement] in the middle of the space," says Fung.

Mandla Reuter, a South African who lives in Berlin, threaded a wrist-thick electrical cable on poles set up throughout the show, then poured a city's worth of current into it. You can't tell that it's plugged in, but the gallery insists that visitors would fry without the wire's insulation. Reuter pits his energy against the architects'.

Italian artist Piero Golia, now based in Los Angeles, got his digs in by cutting a big chunk out of one end of the ramp. Its stump became a platform where visitors could leap onto stunt mattresses below. If the architects wanted to turn an art exhibition into a sensory and spatial spectacle, Golia chose to do them one better and push viewers right over the edge. In any other setting, Golia's artistic jump would itself be empty fun; as configured for "Lucky Number Seven," the piece becomes a commentary on the situation it confronts.

Toronto artist **Scott Lyall** took his awkward wall, hemmed in by the exhibition's ramp, and gave it over to a host of very different painters who volunteered from the local Santa Fe scene. In theory, he then gave them free rein to paint whatever kind of collaborative mural they wanted. But in practice he kept a guiding hand that guaranteed the work would register as his own. First, he nudged his painters, who ranged from graffiti artists to fussy abstractionists, toward making the kind of bold picture he imagined would look best. Then he cut two-inch-wide "pin stripes" of white out of their mural, uniting its original composition, which was mostly an incoherent mix of styles and subjects, into a kind of orderly wallpaper pattern. And finally, he applied a translucent vinyl scrim over the whole thing, pulling other people's picturemaking together into a single, foggy work signed Lyall. It is a work that paints an almost perfect picture of how this whole biennial played out.

All the tensions that Fung brought into being in his show – between artist and curator, freedom and control, the individual work and a collective effect – are there in microcosm in Lyall's project. And the audience is caught in the middle of the turmoil, engaged but perhaps also puzzled by its strange dynamics.

French artists Fabien Giraud and Raphaël Siboni produced an equally engaging, puzzling piece that's also about collaboration, of a sort. Last January the pair took stock of the huge mass of cowboy art for sale in the city and of the New Mexican obsession with visitors from space. They decided to pull both into their own world of contemporary art.

The Frenchmen got a local art dealer to let them have a cowboy bronze titled "Navajo Rollercoaster." Scaled for a tabletop, it showed a young Indian boy galloping his horse down a hill while three white children clung in terror to its bare back behind him. (The subject isn't clear. It could be a kidnapping, or some kind of horseplay.) Then Giraud and Siboni melted down that work's bronze and recast it into an image of an alien abduction sculpted in precisely the same tchotchke style as the original. In their version, the horse has been holed clean through with a Martian laser blast, while the youngest child climbs back up the hill, apparently to wave goodbye to the spaceship that seems to have probed her and her friends. Working a bit like Fung himself, the Frenchmen have crafted a strange kind of forced collaboration between the separate cultures of high art, of low art and of alien abductees. With the added twist that the collaboration will be reversed once the show's over, with the bronze getting recast into its earlier cowboy form.

Fung bills his whole show as a collaborative effort among artists, with him as little more than catalyst. But, like the work of Lyall or of Giraud and Siboni, that's not really what it is. It's a forced encounter between divergent, sometimes contradictory elements – an atom smasher, with Fung at the controls, whose collisions give us insight into the peculiar universe of art.

There's one more useful metaphor for all the strange "collaborations" in this show, and essayist Liza Statton tries it on in the exhibition's catalogue. She compares Fung to the conductor of an orchestra, and that may get things right. Who, after all, remembers the names of an orchestra's musicians? It's the conductor, and the overall dynamic he creates, that matters in the end.

Lucky Number Seven runs through Jan. 4 at Site Santa Fe, 1606 Paseo de Peralta, and at other locations in the New Mexico capital. Call 505-989-1199 or visit <http://www.sitesantafe.org>.