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Artists converge on Santa Fe to jump-start creative process

By Jori Finkel

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SANTA FE, New Mexico: From a distance they looked like any other tourists at the Taos Pueblo in New Mexico, trudging through a muddy, slushy January landscape in black boots and black parkas with cameras and video cameras in hand. But from the snatches of conversation you could tell they were artists of one sort or another.

Passing by some adobe homes, Wael Shawky from Alexandria, Egypt, reflected on the importance of mud in buildings in rural Egypt and in his own large-scale installations. Nadine Robinson from New York and Scott Lyall from Toronto discussed the shape of the dwellings, debating whether Frank Lloyd Wright ever achieved such harmony with nature. And the Australian artist Nick Mangan asked around to see how much the mud bricks used to make an adobe oven cost, and where he might buy them.

Then someone zoomed in for a close-up of a crumpled beer can in the snow, a photograph that may or may not end up in a work of art.

These tourists had not come to New Mexico on vacation but on something of a creative mission: to develop site-specific projects for the 2008 Site Santa Fe Biennial, works that will be installed either in the exhibition's 15,000-square-foot, or 1,395-square-meter, main gallery or around town this summer. Although the exhibition does not open until late June, the creative process began this month, as 22 artists from almost as many countries converged on Santa Fe for a week of reconnaissance.

They were here getting to know the Site team, one another and the region, complete with its picturesque architecture - one artist called it "Santa Fake" - and its multicultural history. (Only two artists in the show were not able to make the trip. They will fly out later this winter.) The curatorial process began a year ago, when Laura Heon, the director of the nonprofit arts group Site Santa Fe, selected Lance Fung as the guest curator of its seventh biennial. She was familiar with his work on "The Snow Show," exhibitions in Finland and Italy that paired architects and artists to create ephemeral works made of snow or ice.

Collaboration was also crucial to Fung's Site proposal, which involved asking curators at other nonprofit arts organizations across the globe, from the Power Plant in Toronto to Ssamzie Space in Seoul, to nominate a handful of emerging artists, from which he made his choices.

It's an unusual model, with the curator relinquishing a good deal of control, first to the nominating curators and ultimately to the artists themselves. While many curators choose particular artworks to make a point, Fung will not know until closer to opening day, June 22, exactly what the artists will make. And he has no theme, just a collection of artists who are open to working in a process-oriented way.

There are, however, a few parameters. Each artist gets \$7,500 to make his or her contribution. No help from deep-pocketed galleries or collectors is allowed. All the artists must return to Santa Fe for at least three weeks before the biennial opens in June to help make their works by hand.

And in a challenge to the commercialism of the art world, all the work will be destroyed or recycled when the exhibition closes in October. But even this seeming constraint could add to the brinkmanship of it all. Fung said that, like "The Snow Show," it was meant to foster a greater sense of experimentation. "If someone does a bad painting, it haunts you for the rest of your life," he said. "This idea is to take pressure off younger artists so they can take great risks." Fung has titled the exhibition "Lucky Number Seven."

Site vans have shuttled the group to various museums by day, and to collectors' homes for parties at night. The artists also held one-on-one meetings with Fung to discuss their ideas in progress.

The Turkish artist Ahmet Ogut, who had papered over two parked cars for the 2005 Istanbul Biennial, transforming one into a taxi and the other into a police car without the owners' permission, was thinking about cars in Santa Fe as well. He showed Fung a book of Santa Fe postcards based on old city photographs, noting that while the architecture in town has stayed the same over time, the cars have grown larger and larger. As a riposte he plans to import a "microcar" like the Canta LX from Europe to zip around Santa Fe. He imagines plastering it with a slogan about place and hiring a local airbrush artist to give it a low-rider vibe.

"I want a hands-on biennial," Fung said to Ogut after praising his idea. "Obviously you're not making the car or using the airbrush, but I want you to think about how to be fully involved."

Working separately, two artists plan to focus on food as a vehicle for cultural transmission. The Beijing artist Shi Qing, who was born in Mongolia, hopes to bring a Mongolian chef to town to work with local ingredients and sell his fusion food in a public square. Mangan is thinking about taking over an abandoned building near Site Santa Fe where he can build an adobe stove to bake bread.

"Nuclear bread," he called it, with a nod to the Los Alamos National Laboratory, about 30 miles, or 48 kilometers, to the northwest.

Other artists were anxiously waiting to see the exhibition design for the Site gallery, which was unveiled on a Saturday, the last day of their trip. In the absence of an organizing theme for the biennial, Fung had hired the New York architects Billie Tsien and Tod Williams, who took part in his "Snow Show," to provide an organizing structure for the gallery space. They came up with the idea of a series of ramps that would cut through the big box space so visitors could trade the usual ground-level views for something higher and more dynamic.

The day before the architects arrived in Santa Fe, model in hand, several artists sounded nervous. "The structure sounds fascist," one said. Another asked, "What if we hate it?" The Italian artist Piero Golia, who now lives in Los Angeles, said: "I'm not worried at all. If I don't like it, I will simply pour concrete into the entire thing." It was not clear if he was joking.

Other artists fretted over whether they were on the right track with their projects. As if to reassure them, the Bulgarian artist Boyadjiev described his own rather clear-cut fallback plan.

"I would take my \$7,500 in dollar bills and hang them on the wall of Site," he declared. "And then I'd take 7,500 names from the Santa Fe phone book and write them beneath each bill." If visitors could locate their names on the wall, they would get to take their dollars home.

The next morning the artists crowded around a conference table for their first glimpse of the gallery model. Tsien and Williams introduced their design, the ramps that carve out a couple of sizable gallery spaces as well as some unconventional corridors that artists could work with - or against. They invited the artists to modify the zigzagging structure as needed, should cost and code allow.

Lyll, the Toronto artist, said he wanted to interact with the structure directly by creating some kind of "interrupted graphic." Earlier he had mentioned something he had heard from Eliza Naranjo-Morse, one of three American Indian artists in the show.

"She told me that native peoples of this area would trade technology but would hold back patterns," he said. "If something had color that vaguely reminded me of Navajo stripes, that wouldn't be bad." Shawky, the Egyptian artist, lobbied for one of the biggest spaces, so he could pitch a massive tent there, made from military fabric. He imagined covering the floor with mud. "Mud has many references," he said. "In Islam we are mud. We are made of earth." Shawky's video and sculpture would be displayed inside the tent, and Fung suggested that other artists might want to plant their work in the mud as well.

The American Indian artists in the show - a mother-daughter-cousin-team from the Santa Clara pueblo, which is famous for its pottery - proposed creating a line of clay running through the show to connect different works. "It could be a pot at one point or crumbles at another," said Nora Naranjo-Morse, the mother. "Our tradition has this idea that energy comes from the belly button. We'd like to reach out to different sections of the show and bring them together into a center."

By this point one of the artists had placed brown-sugar packets in the white foam-core model of the exhibition space, to mark the mud floor of Shawky's installation. "You know, Lance did 'The Snow Show,'" Shawky said. "Maybe this will be the mud show."

"I don't know," Mangan mused. "That could be very problematic."

Heon's gut reaction: "It has to be clean mud. I don't want bugs in my building."

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