ALMINE RECH

Once Within a Time
12th Site Santa Fe International Biennial

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The 12th International takes the title 'Once Within a Time', after a recent film by Godfrey Reggio, the legendary experimental filmmaker who has long resided in Santa Fe. Known for his Qatsi trilogy—comprising the movies Koyaanisqatsi (1983), Powaqqatsi (1988), and Naqoyqatsi (2002)—and his decades-long collaboration with composer Philip Glass, Reggio has remained one of the most singular voices in independent cinema. His most recent film, Once Within a Time (2022), which was shot entirely in studio during the Covid-19 pandemic, is a surreal tour de force through a world of handcrafted vignettes and miniature sets. The film intertwines fairytale atmospheres with apocalyptic landscapes, presenting an allegory of human nature and its conflict with technology.

Through its hypnotic vortices of images—in which children seem trapped, like broken ballerinas in a music box—the film *Once Within a Time* pursues a form of storytelling that blends the fantastical and the mundane in a moving portrait of the existential condition. As the title seems to suggest, the stories Reggio tells are both exceptional and endlessly repeatable.

Inspired by Reggio's circular narratives, the 12th International places storytelling at its heart, with the aim of highlighting the lived experiences of several characters connected to the history of Santa Fe and its surrounding region. Conceived as a vast family album, Once Within a Time takes cues from the lives of a vibrant collection of Santa Feans, bringing together figures both historical and current, real and imagined, whose existential adventures step into dialogue with works of contemporary art.

The 12th International explores the power of storytelling, grounding itself in not only Reggio's film but also the writings of celebrated New Mexican Kiowa/Cherokee poet N. Scott Momaday. In his poem "In the Telling," Momaday writes: "There are many stories in the one. And indeed there is one story in the many. We roll on wheels of words and dreams." The "wheel of telling"—as Momaday describes the art of narration—spins cyclically, connecting the individual and the collective.

'Once Within a Time' eschews the typical biennial's focus on either grand narratives or fleeting snapshots of the global art scene. Instead, it centers people—specifically, those who have inhabited, traversed, or left their mark upon the Sante Fe region across the centuries. The diverse cast of characters that viewers will encounter encompasses historical figures, mythical beings, local heroes, unassuming residents, reclusive artists, forgotten writers, and charismatic healers. The biographies of these people—incarnated in a collection of artifacts, documents, images, and objects—function as catalysts for over 50 contemporary artists, prompted to engage and interact with local histories and personal narrations. The resulting collaborations aim to foster unexpected connections between sites and artworks, at the intersection of art, architecture, history, and literature. The participating artists will breathe new life into forgotten tales and objects presented in close dialogue with several venues across the city.

Departing from tradition, the 12th edition of the SITE SANTA FE International is expanding beyond the confines of the institution itself, grafting onto the city's rich artistic ecosystems and embracing the lively cultural landscapes that define the region. Through partnerships with more than a dozen venues in Santa Fe, Once Within a Time invites contemporary artists to question the concept of "site" as a fixed, monolithic entity; instead, they are encouraged to conceive it as a multifaceted and interconnected space built on lived experiences and layered histories. Various Santa Fe cultural institutions will provide fertile ground for artistic creations, hosting chapters of the exhibition and presenting public programs and events. This ambitious expansion promises a truly revelatory exploration of Santa Fe's past, present, and future. The 12th International partners include both local cultural institutions—such as the Museum of International Folk Art, New Mexico History Museum including the Palace of the Governors, New Mexico Military Museum, and the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian—and non- institutional sites, like vacant storefronts, toy shops, hotel rooms, and historical cinemas, among many others.

The artistic presentations encompass a range of interventions, from site-specific sculptures and large-scale installations to subtle disruptions and participatory actions. The artist commissions involve production of new works that infiltrate the routines and configurations of the city, provoking distinct encounters with art against the unique background of Santa Fe. Each artist, in their novel way, will imagine a different type of choral participation, immersing viewers in intricate choreographies that weave together the personal and the collective.

To quote Dr. Estevan Rael-Gálvez, a foremost voice on the histories and cultures of New Mexico:

Beyond the epic and grand, including the terrible and traumatic, there are also the small everyday stories, all reflecting survival and endless dignity and strength, as well as beauty and joy. While it is critical to trace the jagged edges of what New Mexico tells, it is also important to recognize that New Mexico's collective identity is both born out of the past and nourished by it as well. There is a delicacy, but also strength in what we do to collectively change what we are.[1]

In 2025, the 12th SITE SANTA FE International endeavors to honor these principles both by amplifying Santa Feans' individual stories and by demonstrating the capacity of contemporary artists to respond to, enlarge, and be enlarged by them.

1: Dr. Estevan Rael-Gálvez, "Telling Reflections of New Mexico"