The Second Johannesburg Biennale, *Trade Routes: History and Geography*, raised important issues about the nature of artists and curators who function as global citizens and about those of us who are art travelers and become part of their peripatetic audience. Mounted in 1997, this huge and spectacular biennial brought 160 artists from 65 countries to the tip of Africa and staged a conference convening cultural workers from around the world to address the issues of transnationalism, itinerancy, and diasporic art production. Because the exhibition was held in downtown Johannesburg and because its immediate adjacencies were burnt-out buildings and crime-ridden streets, this inquiry inevitably turned on itself. The intent and significance of international art exhibitions and how they position themselves in relationship to their geographic and historical contexts came into question.

The Guggenheim Bilbao also presents interesting complexities about the experience of traveling to Bilbao to see U.S.-curated exhibitions in a museum whose mission has little to do with art making in Spain, and even less to do with the particular situation of the Basques, ETA—their separatist movement—and its ongoing struggles with the Spanish government. This fabulous new building brings an international audience to Bilbao but stands apart from its cultural locality.

What occurs when travelers see the world through art and artists attempt to transcend their own point of origin and engage in conversations across national boundaries? What happens when artists from all over the world, now living in New York, London, or other Western metropolises, position themselves as transnational or postnational but then are selected by curators to represent their point of origin in such contexts as international biennials, to the exclusion of those who have never left?

As the concept of the global citizen and the romance surrounding it takes hold, who is entitled to this appellation? How does one achieve such citizenship? In what location does it exist, in what time, in whose history? Has the international art world become its own entity, its own nation, with its own citizenry, its own rules? What happens to art production when the Other is implicitly understood as those not part of the art world?

Returning from the Johannesburg Biennale—and its postnationalist aesthetic—several artists, curators, and I were en route to New York when our South African Airlines flight announced it would make a fuel stop at Ihla do Sal (Island of Salt), a small island off the coast of Africa. The simulated miniature airplane on the map in front of us had been laboriously inching its way up through the vast, interminable Kalahari desert for hours. It was dark when the actual plane finally landed. None of us knew what date, time, or day it was. We weren’t sure if Ihla do Sal was part of Cape Verde, or owned by South Africa. And we didn’t know what language the islanders spoke or what commerce they engaged in. Given the option of leaving the plane or remaining on board, most chose to disembark and were ushered into an airport waiting room with instructions not to leave because we had not gone through
customs and had not officially entered the country. Surprisingly, in this large room we found groups of Russians smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee. Why were they here? Had they been working in Angola? Trapped in a room filled with smokers and unable to step outside, those of us who did not smoke were getting sick and angry. Caught midway between New York and Johannesburg, we were a group of displaced biennials turning lavender in the fluorescent light.

Having just engaged in so much postnational theory, we might have felt liberated by this out-of-nation experience had we been better able to imagine where we were. No longer travelers involved in a process of recognition, we had become passengers in transit between two points, inhabiting the nonorganic space of travel—mind out of time, time out of mind, as Edgar Allan Poe liked to say. We were in a postmodern moment unable to locate ourselves in cultural space. We were in a postnational moment unable to locate ourselves in geographic/political space. And, however philosophically attuned to such abstractions we were, our organic physical response to these uncertainties was to become disoriented.

The Guggenheim Bilbao sits like a landed spaceship in one of the former industrial parts of the city. This once great steel empire, one of the richest in Europe, has taken on the challenge of postindustrialism, using art and architecture to reinvent itself as an international cultural center. Bilbao has now become a point of destination for the art world. Most Basques are pleased about all this and affectionately refer to Frank Gehry’s achievement as the “Gugen.” There are even local jokes about the building. One goes like this: “Have you seen the Puppy?” (referring to the Jeff Koons dog stuffed with petunias that towers in front of the Museum). “Yes,” says the other enthusiastically, “but have you seen his house?”

The new Guggenheim is golden at night and silver in the day, industrial titanium transformed into a skin so light one imagines the entire mass could float away, all defining points of finality rounded. There are no edges. This sphericity separates it by a century from all adjacent structures. The building itself is the attraction, the reason for the trip. Gehry’s creation daily brings masses of tourists and their money to this once very prosperous city more recently sunk into unemployment. Everywhere is the sense of the ghost of industry. The industrial bridge that hovers on the side of the Guggenheim is contrasted with the Calatrava Bridge up the river. The blue-colored wall to the left of the entrance makes reference to the multihued shipping containers stacked next to cranes that you can see from the Guggenheim, ready to load them for transport. The titanium itself is a reimagined industrial material given new purpose. Everything here is about light and volume spiraling over a void. Inside there is a museum whose major point of reference is New York. Not really a contact zone in James Clifford’s sense, not a place where colonial and autochthonous cultures interact, or where cultures interweave to create something really new, rather, this is a U.S. museum in Spain. Visitors from all over the world come to see works by Judd, Stella, Morris, Rauschenberg, Rosenquist, Warhol, Andre, Dine, Holzer, Oldenburg, Serra, and other exhibitions on the Guggenheim curatorial circuit. Gargantuan sculptures of the biggest U.S. art stars look like the toys of giants in the main hall’s voluminous

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space, all built for a cost that can only be imagined—22,000 million pesetas, approximately 150 million dollars.

But what does it mean to have this museum in a location which for Spaniards is not unlike any nondescript U.S. industrial city? The Basques who have resisted Spanish domination do not seem concerned about the cultural invasion of U.S. art and curatorial decision making. But then again, the museum was their idea. The North Americans came on their invitation, money, and business savvy. “The Basques,” Gehry says, always referring to them as a nation, “spared no expense.” From the point of view of governments, culture works. It effectively puts cities on the tourist map.

When I first heard that a Guggenheim guard was killed by Basque separatists, I was in Johannesburg at the Biennale’s conference. I thought that perhaps the murder was ETA’s response to the building of a U.S. museum in a Basque province, but I was naive. The guard was killed by mistake; the bomb actually was targeted for the Spanish king, who had come for the opening. The museum, on the contrary, is loved by the Basques—not for what is
inside, or even particularly for the building itself, because many local people we spoke with had not visited it—but rather for the prestige it has brought Bilbao and the revenue, way beyond their wildest imaginings. The phenomenon fits the Basque country’s image of itself as autonomous, as Euskadi, an international region that could secede from Spain.

On the evening we stayed in Bilbao, the city was overrun by youth representing ETA. Hooded and violent, they broke windows and trashed the city wherever they could. The riot police were called out. Given that it was summer in Spain, where people go to dinner at midnight, such events explained why the streets were so bare at night. But what of all this do most art world tourists know or care to know? The art traveler’s word on Bilbao is: “See the museum, eat. You can do it in a day, two at the most.” I’ve heard it more than once.

For the most part, it is just another Guggenheim added to New York and Venice, but that much more fabulous because the building is one of the first true buildings of the next century, a building unbuildable, Gehry insists,
without the use of the computer as a design tool. This building recognizes what postindustrialism means—that even brick and mortar, here titanium and rivets—can be transformed into light and movement. The mandate for the next century is that even matter can be morphed by illusion, and even gravity will be defied.

In contrast, all was heavy during the Johannesburg Biennale, and gravity was omnipresent. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was in session, and the weight of the past sat on a city fighting its own potential anarchy. As each day revealed another horrific truth of betrayal and sadism, South Africa struggled to reconcile itself with its history and to move beyond apartheid. The Biennale positioned itself beyond the concept of nationhood and in so doing created a fascinating subject matter but inadvertently remained outside the prevailing debate of its geographic context. Certainly the intention of Okwui Enwezor, the Biennale’s director, was not to leap over the local, contemporary South African debate but rather to position South Africa as an international player in the art/curatorial arena. But perhaps the timing was unfortunate given South Africa’s pressing demands and the tremendous efforts necessary to reconstitute itself after thirty devastating years of apartheid.

Like the Guggenheim Bilbao, the Biennale was a monument to nomadism—a tribute, a celebration of a longed-for time when national boundaries will be dissolved, when the currency, the vehicle of communication for this transformation out of the past, even outside of history, will be images and art itself.

There are many artists who now present their work as international and global, recognizing that the conversation they are involved in crosses national boundaries. Such work deals with diasporic, postcolonial situations and, like the work of Alfredo Jaar or Ernesto Pujol, is often quite political in its concern with specific, historical situations. A good deal of the work in the Biennale fit such a description. But, however specific, part of the Biennale’s problem was that the work, although in large part familiar in form to those moving between biennials and large urban centers, was not familiar to many South Africans, who had never seen such work and did not know the predominantly Western aesthetic or how to look at it and, perhaps most significantly, had been cut off from the international contemporary art world because of the cultural boycott for too many years.

It is as if in this era of postnationality, the international art world has become a place of origination itself, imagined into being by its curators in what Michael Brenson has termed the Curator’s Moment.1 But just when it seems all this curatorial emphasis on globalism should have made the world bigger, in fact it all seems to have gotten smaller. If most artists represented in these international biennials have left their point of origin—Africa, Southeast Asia, Central Europe, Latin America—to enter into the New York art world, what languages are they now actually speaking once their own hybridity is complete, once their individual points of view are sifted through the sieve of the New York aesthetic? What then has happened to all any local conversations in this translocal, transregional debate? How can the local permeate the global when, even in art making, it may speak different discourses, represent different constituencies, classes, and forms that the art world often excludes? From

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where does work take its aura if it no longer exists in relationship to a physical locality but rather to a series of global ideas? If its concerns are social, where is its imagined point of impact? And, if these questions are asked of diasporic artists, why are they not asked of North American ones?

I add to this set of concerns one that is even greater. To whom are we as artists, writers, curators responsible when attempting to exist in relation to no one society? If the political issues in question are global, to whom do we express these concerns? How do individuals outside corporations operate as transnationals? Some who move through such an elite world of art, culture, writing, production, and exhibition now seem to answer only to the art world. Even though the work appears to be socially motivated, the only real consequence of such critical effort is the degree to which the work is found acceptable, unacceptable, or exceptional by the art world, measured by the reviews it receives—the quality of the paper trail it generates, and relatedly the sales it ultimately accomplishes. This phenomenon is not pleasing to artists who often do want to have an impact on society but who are rendered impotent by their lack of currency in the debates around globalization.

Unfortunately, the world now seems divided between what Jacques Attali calls the rich and poor nomads: the nomadic elite who travel at will, expanding their world, and the disenfranchised poor who travel because they are desperate to improve their conditions.\(^2\) However indigent artists may sometimes be, we in the art world are very distinct from those migratory laborers who cross borders illegally, return again and again, live on the margins, negotiate cultures because there is no other way to earn a living. These people move at constant risk to their lives without the romance of travel or the delirium of adventure. Migrant workers who cross the Mexican/U.S. border every day in search of work don’t always survive the INS. There is a great difference between their experience of borders and that of my students, who come from all over the world to study art in the United States, for example, and who do receive the level of education they cannot find in their own countries—whether in Ireland, Korea, Thailand, Brazil, Israel, Pakistan, South Africa, or Norway. In the process of becoming educated, they also inadvertently become multinational and postnational. And although they might have few resources, they ultimately do very well in this global art world, living on the boundaries of culture, versed in several languages and discourses, constructing and deconstructing their identities at every turn. They are the future, and certainly the future of the art world. But often their own self-chosen immigration becomes expatriation, as they are more and more formed and informed by the West and therefore less able to return “home.” Many live in political limbo when in the United States and usually, although not always, only truly engage with the local when they return, bringing their new hybridity back into their own culture, challenging, forming, engaging, and often transforming local debates. And it is, in truth, many of these artists and writers who make work or write about the transnational experience and are then chosen to be in international exhibitions because the work talks about the process of crossing over and has been formed within the Western aesthetic. But what does it mean to come from Asia, Latin America, Africa, or certain regions of the United States and become part of this international discourse? As their work becomes more and

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more about the complexity of their relationship to their multiple realities, and as they speak more and more from the centers of capitalism, where is their point of connection to those who have never left these places that may now have become the economic peripheries, or worse, beyond the measurable parameters of the global market altogether?

About all this theoretical transmigration, there is romance. Perhaps it is a convenient relief to imagine transnationality as a new ideal. Now that we have seen the end of the hope of Marxism, and socialism, and the rampant acceptance, without resistance, of global capitalism, the aura of U.S. audiovisual production is everywhere imperialistic but still unchallenged. What other social systems could we now believe in? Perhaps the abstraction of transnationalism is especially attractive at this dystopian moment when it seems less and less viable to transform societies in the particular or general. Isn’t it actually easier to think of oneself as a citizen of the world than as a citizen of one’s own neighborhood, where gang violence, unemployment, pollution, racism, a defunct educational system may prevail and seem so much more overwhelming? Aren’t these ideas of globalism just abstract enough to counter the need for any real local involvement or praxis—the integration of theory with meaningful social action? Or is nomadism in the Deleuzian sense a truly superior reality—one that transcends the apparatus of the state? At its best, such thinking could be understood, as Roland Robertson has suggested, as the “particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular.” But what does this mean in a political sense? It would seem that all such activity fits quite nicely within the directions already chartered by global capitalism. If there is resistance in international exhibitions, where is it? What ideologies are actually contested?

It is true that exhibitions ultimately make their own context. That is their strength but also the heart of their contradictions. But the context for such events is not always formed in organic space. Marc Auge refers to space where no “organic social life is possible” as “non-place.” We have experienced such space—the white walls of the gallery, the categorized chambers of the museum, the formal spaces designed not to interfere with art. These are spaces in which very few people feel comfortable. The more we live in “non-place,” the less we understand the discomfort such space presents to others.

In the extreme, non-place can appear as blank space—shopping malls, suburbs, airports. But increasingly such space has become ideological. Everywhere we are bombarded by the CNN loop. No longer alone with our thoughts, our books, our work, no longer allowed to have private space in the public arena, everything is now sold, even the possibility of silence. In U.S. airports the news has become packaged, homogenized, for all audiences. CNN news loops may no longer report the local. We read the New York Times in almost any small city in the United States and the Wall Street Journal in all its myriad European/Asian manifestations. When traveling, those who can shop in duty-free airport malls are able to buy the same products from New York to Singapore, disposable items for those with disposable incomes. In these forays, we “experience the world vicariously and safely,” as Attali writes. Even when the historical environment is not safe, the nomadic elite is. Gilles Deleuze tells us that in nomadic thought, “the dwelling is not tied

6. Attali, 105.
to a territory but rather to an itinerary.”7 Nomads traditionally are preurban or unurban, but this new breed of nomads is actually posturban, dwelling for a large part in airports—shelters of transport—all over the world, living within a series of temporary nonengagements, almost always able to skip the local, yet connected to those not present through nomadic objects—cell phones, laptops. We engage best with what is not there. Where are we at any one moment? From where is creative work now made? From whose point of origin is it formed? To which nation/nations do we owe our expertise, allegiance, energy? With whom is the conversation being held? In what timeless, spaceless, nationless location are these extravaganzas shown? What audience do they reach? In what interstitial spaces should they be viewed? Through what or whose prism of value should their success be measured? And who is being left behind—what classes, which races, which artists, what types of art are exiled from the conversation? What aspects of this delocalized itinerancy are progressive? Which are not?

When we landed in Kennedy Airport after the sixteen-hour journey from the tip of Africa, we, the recently returned biennalists, were in a state of dislocation. At the baggage claim I felt a bit uneasy, as I often do at such transitional/transnational moments when I am about to leave my simulated nomadic tribe and enter the world of domesticated locality. Some of us were actually home. I wasn’t. Having grown up in New York, JFK always seems the nonspace of my psychic point of origin, the “almost home,” but I still always have to go to my actual place of residency and employment—Chicago. We all seemed stunned to be back in the United States, but in true nomadic fashion, even at 6 a.m. and with only a few minutes to spare between flight connections, the tribe began to put down its virtual tents and get to the business of rhizomatic, global connection. Several of us were already on the phones calling Brooklyn, the Bronx, counting back to Chicago, Los Angeles, Seoul, Bangkok, and ahead to Johannesburg, Berlin. One person had sat down, plugged in her nomadic object of navigation, and began surfing the Net. Someone else was responding to e-mail, others were checking voicemail. All, it seemed, were on the move again in virtual space. Intellectual/artist travelers, such as we, could not let any grass grow under our feet. Even had we a piece of land on which to grow some grass and even could we admit such retrodomestic desires for organic cultivation, anything we did plant would certainly die. We’d never be there, anywhere, long enough to water it. And anyway, as Bruce Chatwin notes, nomads are grazers, not planters. Restless, they take the best from each location and move on. Not unlike the art world.8

While waving goodbye, we expressed the hope that we’d meet again in São Paulo, Venice, Kwangju, Sydney, Taipei, Kassel. We seemed like transnational executives living in airports across the globe. But we were unlike them, to our credit, we were actually quite interested in the societies we moved through. And also, we did not possess the VIP/Red Carpet Lounge cards with which to access the inner sanctum of nonspace. We made considerably less money than our corporate counterparts and most unfortunately exerted none of their political influence.

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