

Over the past decade, all kinds of political and social walls came tumbling down, including many of those which sought to preserve contemporary art as the exclusive property of a handful of nations. In this newly international cultural landscape, it has become a cliché to observe that all art centers have become peripheries — that no single major city or nation can currently claim to be the world's art capitol. All of which, on the surface at least, sounds like a very good thing.

At the same time, the last decade has also seen an inflationary growth of international biennales. Once upon a time, there was only Venice. Then there were a handful. By the mid-90s, there were about a dozen per year. Yesterday in a talk across town, the figure of 60 international biennales was mentioned. Clearly, we are heading towards a situation where the world will be host to a single, continuous international biennale that is on all the time, everywhere.

One obvious consequence of this inflation is that the value of any individual biennale is diminished, and this is as true of the bigger and older shows as it is of the newer arrivals. Where Venice once could pretend to define a given moment in the art world, and people would wait two years to hear the news — there are now dozens of other biennales redefining what's new and of value.

The one thing almost all of these shows have in common is that they typically feature an impressive array of artists from an equally impressive array of countries. They invoke the model of the United Nations, or World's Fair. They give off a whiff of an international utopia, in other words. As if contemporary art were the Esperanto of a global democracy. Indeed, these shows typically seem to proceed from an assumption that showcasing an internationalist ethic, rather than aesthetic, is the only reasonable *raison d'être* for any truly 'contemporary' exhibition.

Such shows have helped create a conspicuous platform for a new breed of nomadic curators — frequent flyer flaneurs who travel the globe monitoring a growing number of ever-changing local art scenes. But the territory of contemporary art is so vast that not even these globe-trotting curators can possibly stay on top of it all: consequently, many international biennales are organized by curatorial teams, led by an Artistic Director, a title that testifies to the apotheosis of the mere curator.

This new type of global curator often claims to be self-reflective about their practice in a manner that sets out to remedy the excesses of the star-oriented international mega-shows of the 1980's. Yet there is a dismaying sameness to many of their biennales, in which so many of the same faces turn up over and over. Many of these exercises in internationalism seem to traffic in the rhetoric of globalism rather than actually exploring, or creating, new worlds of art. And not infrequently, they give off a distinct scent of grandiosity, as if simply by virtue of including artists from around the world they had achieved global importance.

In a sense, they aspire to be temporary world centers, an ambition which seems ironic given the posturing about center and periphery, nomadic art vs. place-bound art, which surrounds so many of these shows. Yet all too often these shows end up presenting artworks from other places as if other places are all the same.

Convention biennales proceed from a declared or unspoken assumption or organizing principle which mimics that of an encyclopedia. The biennale aspires to include all that is worth including from the previous two years. Like the encyclopedia, that modernist construction par excellence, it claims to define what is worth defining.

This limited idea of the biennale, as a kind of gourmet supermarket where you find only the best things, has a number of dismal consequences. Its chief international importance is as a place where other curators, who may have smaller research budgets, go shopping for new works and artists to fill their programs at home.

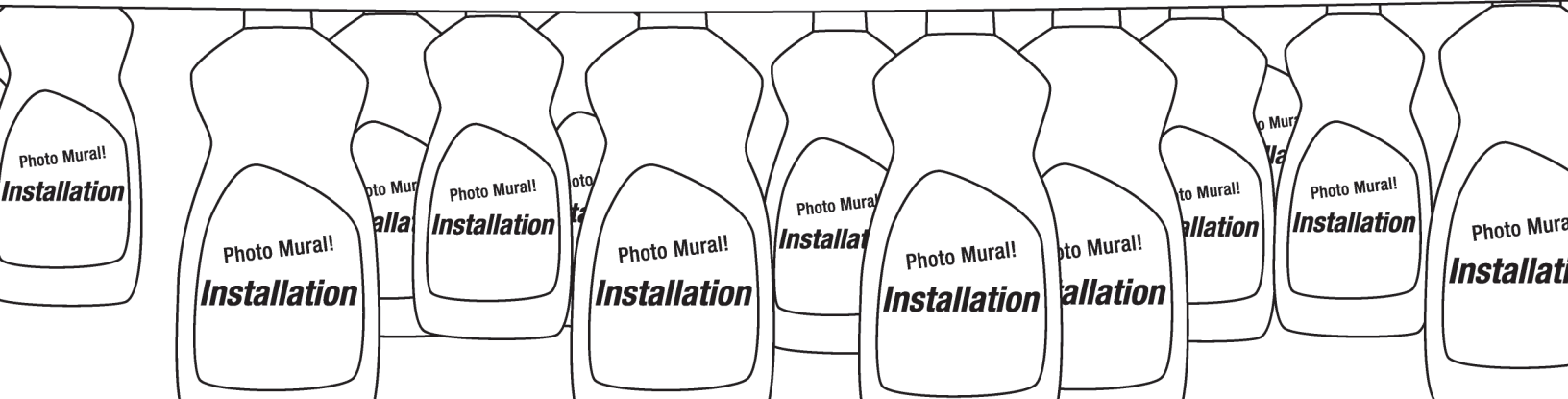
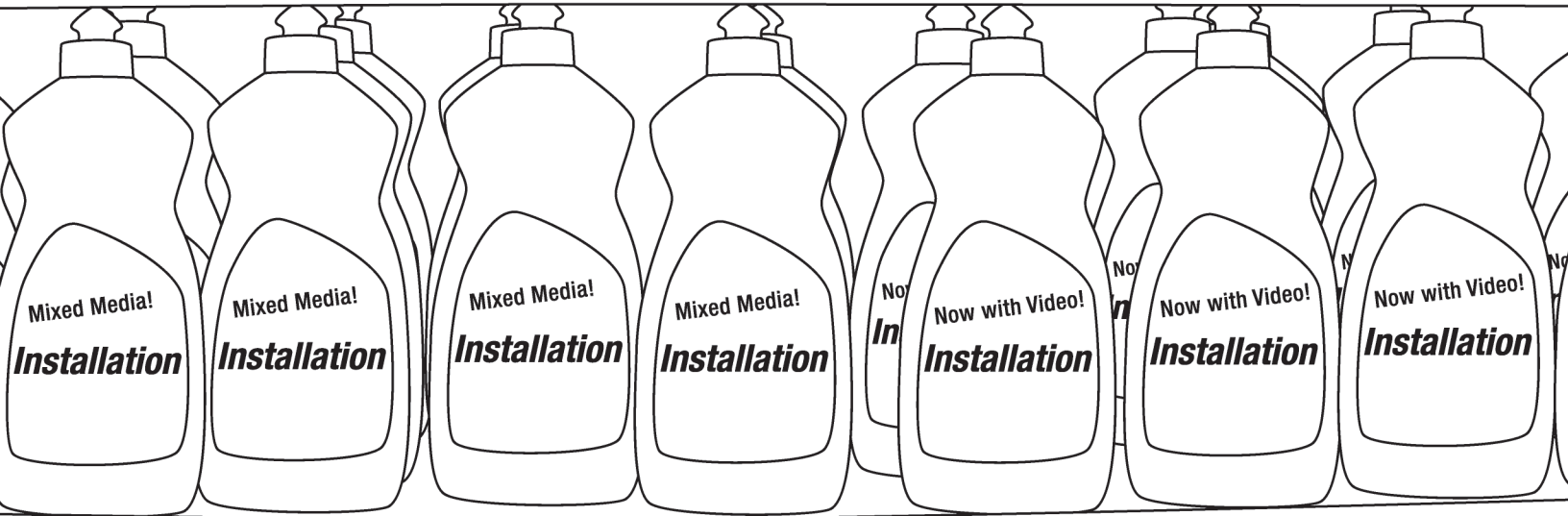
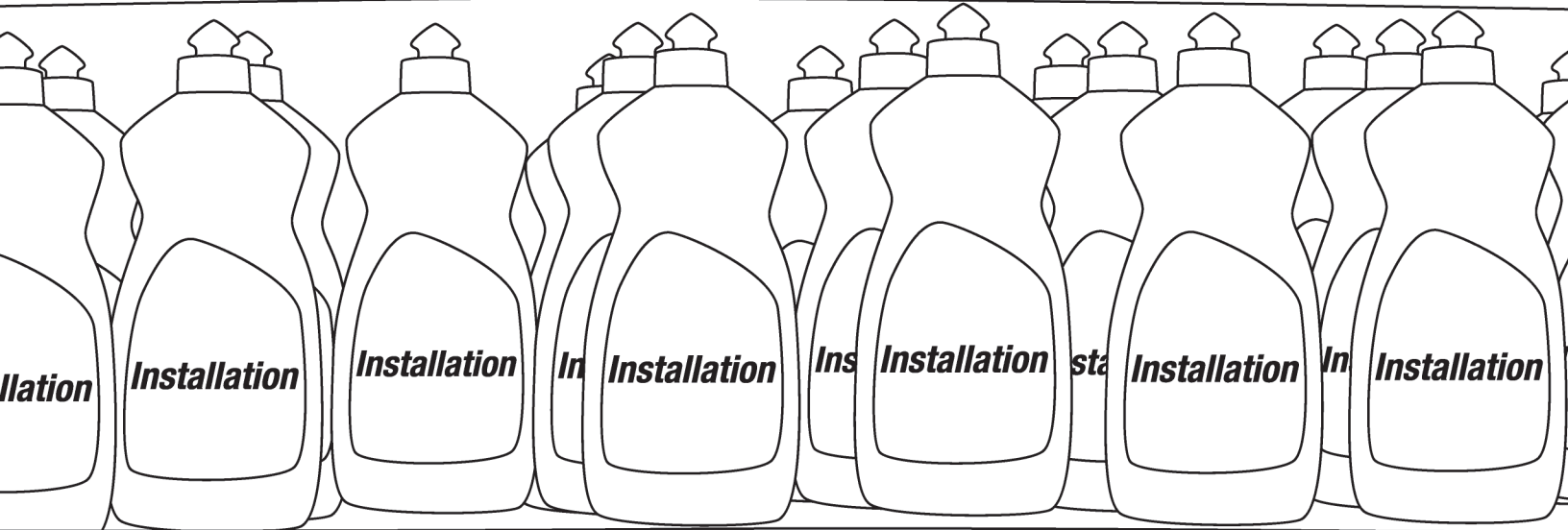
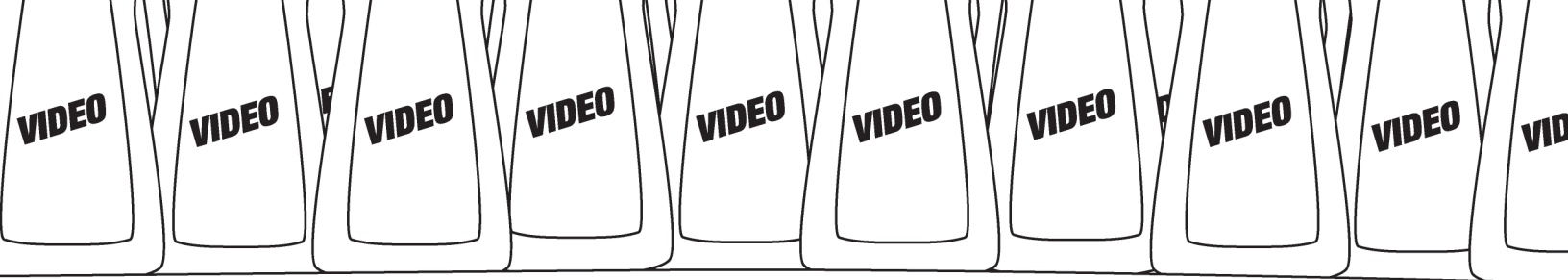
This tendency further exaggerates the biennale's obsession with novelty. Typically, biennales showcase work only from the previous two years. The only thing that links the works in the show is that they are all relatively new. There is a great competition among many curators in this respect, to see who is the first to show such-and-such an artist. This is a model of curating that essentially reduces curators to the level of pigs hunting for truffles.

The corollary of this emphasis on the new is a resistance to fully articulated themes, which involve a rhetorical proposition and the fashioning of an argument about why the works in a show are chosen and how they make sense together. The supermarket doesn't have themes, it has sections and so does the average biennale.

# JUNE

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				<b>1</b> venice biennale	<b>2</b> iowa biennial	<b>3</b> whitney biennial
<b>4</b> 19th st. biennial	<b>5</b> super biennial	<b>6</b> p.diddy's b'nally	<b>7</b> in-flight biennial	<b>8</b> alberta biennial	<b>9</b> mtv spring break biennial	<b>10</b> tokyo biennial
<b>11</b> blanket diennale	<b>12</b> biennial olympics	<b>13</b> new biennial	<b>14</b> new biennial 2	<b>15</b> law & order biennial	<b>16</b> special biennial	<b>17</b> bosnian biennial
<b>18</b> the love biennial in berlin	<b>19</b> east timor biennial	<b>20</b> annual biennial	<b>21</b> le tour d'iennale	<b>22</b> joe's biennial	<b>23</b> jersey biennial	<b>24</b> 700 club biennial
<b>25</b> barnes & noble bn-all	<b>26</b> sundance biennale	<b>27</b> nascar speed biennial	<b>28</b> ibiza biennale	<b>29</b> yoga be-nial	<b>30</b> wwf smack-down biennial	

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Part of the theoretical argument against themed exhibitions is that themes close down our possible interpretations of a work. They provide too narrow or restrictive a context. What some curators propose instead is an open ended, globalized eclecticism, a boundary-less celebration of supposedly boundary-breaking art. But this criticism of the themed show is predicated on a kind of myth that we can approach a work of art from a position of complete openness, with no presuppositions, no sense of its historical context. This is, of course, absurd. Our encounters with art are never innocent of expectations and presuppositions. So curators might as well find a way to deal with them.

What often results from theme-less biennales, which pretend to present a collection of the world's greatest hits, is a very dispiriting experience. The viewer moves from one gallery to the next, unable to forge any sense of connection between the things we see. We get frustrated and turned off, as our experience shows no promise of adding up to more than the sum of unrelated moments. There is no chance of our discovering multiple threads, webs of connections, linking the art works to one another and to a larger context.

Given this enervating context, artists strive to make their work stand out from the crowd. The consequence is the rise of what could be called the genre of *Biennale Art*: art that can function well under crowded and senseless exhibition conditions. Think video projection pieces, huge photographic murals, sprawling and spectacular mixed-media works that require their own galleries. (Biennales, generally, are not good environments for quieter, more intimate works. They simply get lost in the crowd.)

Another characteristic of much biennale art is that it is about something, like globalism, for instance. This is the post-conceptual pretense, a work that makes little effort to engage the viewer in a specific aesthetic experience. Perhaps it is a matter of translation. Work that is about something is easy to explain, and so perhaps easier to travel. Yet this tendency also seems to mirror the totalising ambition of traditional biennales. At a recent biennale I attended, an artist wrote that his modest contribution was about 'the space between heaven and earth, the past and the future, nature and civilization, and the mutual calling of differing cultures.' Not bad for a not very good piece of sculpture.

To conclude: while it might have once seemed worthwhile to attempt a summing up of the state of things in contemporary art — trying to establish a consensus about who mattered and who didn't — the inflationary growth of biennales has rendered this idea of a universal summation redundant. Clearly, it is not enough to simply show art from different places as if this was in itself a virtuous achievement. In the end, after all, it is art's ability to hone in on specificity and difference that enable it to challenge and beguile. Rather than more biennales that aspire to be temporary world centers, I hope we see shows that deal with the global phenomenon of contemporary art. Through their shared connections and overlapping concerns these works of art can resonate with and transform their local settings.

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