

# Biennial Conversions at the Borders of Liberalism

## AN INTRODUCTION

Art biennials are now a familiar exhibition form for publics interested in contemporary art. Many readers of this book have probably heard of them or even visited a few. Others might step foot in an art biennial in the years to come. But art biennials were not always a commonplace way for art audiences to experience contemporary art. Whereas they have existed since the end of the nineteenth century, for most of the twentieth century art biennials played a relatively marginal role compared to museums and galleries in the selection, exhibition, and valuation of institutionally legitimated art. The comparatively marginal significance of the art biennial began to change during the 1980s. In 1983, when Fidel Castro created the Bienal de La Habana by state decree, approximately four art biennials happened regularly throughout the world: the Venice Biennale, the Bienal de São Paulo, the Sydney Biennial, and documenta. By the end of the twentieth century, around 150 biennials had proliferated worldwide, and an estimated 250 biennials sprouted regularly throughout the globe before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.<sup>1</sup> This explosion in art biennials has come to be known by art world insiders as the “biennial boom,” and it has prompted

important changes in how institutionally legitimated art worlds curate and exhibit art on the international, national, and local levels. What was once a rare and exceptional event has become perhaps the most important staging ground for contemporary art trends, bringing about a reformulation of what we understand as art, how we relate to it, and how knowledge about it is produced.

What triggered this swift proliferation of art biennials? What allowed biennials to become, in such a short period of time, the favored display form of contemporary art professionals and patrons throughout the world? What dreams and desires did early-boom biennials address and help to create? Motivated by these and related questions, this book zooms into three art biennials in the very early years of the biennial boom: the Bienal de La Habana (Havana), inSITE (San Diego and Tijuana), and Manifesta (Rotterdam). By looking closely at these three early cases, the book documents and analyzes the conditions of possibility for the consolidation of the art biennial as the period's dominant exhibition form. Placed at the borders of North Atlantic liberalism, each of the three biennials examined in this book gained prominence shortly before and immediately after the demise of the Soviet Bloc: their emergence was tightly interwoven with the seismic political and economic transformations that led to and accompanied the end of the Cold War. Significantly, each of these three biennials dealt with the end-of-the-century legacies of aesthetic programs bred in socialist revolutions. They all helped prefigure what many hoped would be a largely pacified world at the end of a tumultuous century. Early-boom biennials like these three portrayed themselves not only as exhibitions of artistic innovation and venues for knowledge production but also as mechanisms that would help mend the social, political, and cultural divisions that had accrued during the long Cold War. In the early stages of the 1990s economic and cultural globalization, these exhibits actualized two foundational hypotheses for European modern aesthetics: the possibility of a relation of causality between aesthetic experience and world peace, and art's capacity to articulate truthfully the driving spirit of a historical moment.

The term *art biennial* is applied equally to a variety of temporary exhibits that take place every two, three, or five years in different parts of the world.<sup>2</sup> These large-scale group exhibitions present before audiences a comprehensive selection of artworks that aim to attest to the latest trends in contemporary art. But biennials are not mere reflections of preexisting artistic fashions. Rather, they have become some of the key sites through

which the global art world has been constituted and configured in the manner that it has. As this book will show, over the past thirty years, biennials have become increasingly central to the shaping of elite art worlds—including professionals, audiences, aesthetic tendencies, and bodies of knowledge. Their ambitious scope and dimensions require several days of commitment from the audience. Often installed in a variety of venues in their host cities, they invite wandering and sightseeing, blending the phenomenology of art with that of its surroundings for the art tourists who travel the world in pilgrimage chasing the biennial calendar. As Caroline A. Jones explains, the propagation of art biennials has yielded a biennial culture moved by “an appetite for art as experience,” a culture that is highly influenced by the practice of tourism and that has a clear impact on the urban fabric where biennials are staged.<sup>3</sup> Biennials are also discursive operations, where artwork selection and installation translate curatorial authorial voices into the gallery.<sup>4</sup> In most cases, biennial curatorial teams change per iteration, bestowing to the biennial phenomenon the function of cyclically delivering newness and feeding an industry of qualified professionals. To their rhythm and spread, Terry Smith adds biennials’ aptness to reflect the global contemporary art world’s capacity to entertain, instruct, and fuel competition, as well as their role in facilitating negotiations between local and global art worlds.<sup>5</sup> Some biennials have at times restricted their artist selection to a particular constituency, with the purpose of advancing the artistic production of a specific community or creating new regional artistic categories; however, others embrace variably loose notions of the “global” to signal their scope. Although explicit political affiliation is not a constant, many of these events have outspokenly embraced particular political causes. Others have remained seemingly apolitical in their programmatic stances—a silence that hasn’t, however, made them politically innocuous.<sup>6</sup>

## Biennial Conversions

The fall of the Berlin Wall kindled a newfound sense of relief for many across the globe—especially through the regions on the East and the West of the Iron Curtain divide, who since 1947 had lived through the many conflicts of the long Cold War. The magic of the moment spread over the following few years, as the Soviet Union collapsed and liberal democracy stormed, hand in hand with capitalism, into the former socialist states, announcing an end to decades-old antinomies. The public was ripe for feelings of

interrelation, closeness, and communion. Markets grew to incorporate products, consumers, and industries that had previously been off-limits, launching a new era of economic and cultural globalization. Books were written; songs were sung.<sup>7</sup>

Art also reflected this optimistic vision of a world rapidly reordering. After a difficult 1980s marked by the HIV/AIDS epidemic and hostile cultural policies in the North Atlantic art capitals, contemporary art worlds in early-1990s Western Europe and the United States experienced significant shifts.<sup>8</sup> Economic recession hindered contemporary art acquisitions, prompting a younger generation of contemporary artists to embrace a wide diversity of media to reflect the times' reordering of boundaries and renewed experience of connectedness. In the 1993 Whitney Biennial, for example, Allan Sekula's *Fish Story* reflected on the contradictions of the period's economic globalization by documenting scenes at four major maritime trade ports in the wake of the first Gulf War. Many artists also adopted a critical disposition toward the art institution in their work. Fred Wilson presented twinned installations at the 1993 Whitney and Cairo biennials, reclaiming Ancient Egyptian heritage to trace African-centric global histories that unveiled museums' bias toward white-centric, elite North Atlantic narratives. The art institutional complex opened itself to slowly welcome artists from regions formerly excluded from it. The Australian pavilion in the 1990 Venice Biennale featured the work of two Aboriginal artists for the first time: Trevor Nicholls and Rover Thomas. Their intrinsically political work rendered the violences shaping the contemporary Aboriginal experience before primarily US and Western European art audiences. In that same exhibition, the San Diego / Tijuana-based collective Border Art Workshop / Taller de Arte Fronterizo represented the United States with a series of installations that shed light on the forms of coloniality, past and present, shaping life at the borders of liberalism. Artists in the early 1990s also expressed an increased interest in site-specificity. In documenta 9 (1992), Nigerian artist Mo Edoga built *Signal of Hope*, a makeshift tower with driftwood from the local Fulda River that changed during the hundred days of the exhibition, and Japanese artist Tadashi Kawamata applied favela homebuilding techniques to produce *People's Garden*, an assemblage of huts alongside a canal in the biennial's gardens.

The conciliatory spirit of the moment drastically influenced the institutional conventions dominant in the contemporary art world, prompting the art biennial as a favored exhibition form to stage, via contemporary art, these widely held longings for world peace. Exhibitions promoting

unification and conviviality were many, and they prefigured the time's big geopolitical changes to come. This belief in the potential of biennial art exhibitions to join historically separate stakeholders reflected the increased access of art world actors from Western Europe and the United States to territories and artistic repertoires that had until then enjoyed only a limited presence in the North Atlantic-centric international art world—such as regions under former Soviet influence but also Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Although art biennials had been organized before to celebrate cultural alliances and signal political change, they became especially serviceable as markers of the many transformations that would reshape artistic practice in these transitional years. These exhibitions became an ideal display device: their cyclical nature conferred upon them a singular capacity to sync to the time's fast-paced changes. As well, the then-relative absence of a standard biennial organizational tool kit granted them an unmatched malleability to adapt and convert diverse locales, publics, and topics into global issues. Unlike museums, which were bound to nation-making narratives, art biennials in the early to mid-1990s promised to connect cities directly with emerging global networks of culture and commerce. During the decade, these exhibitions would multiply to become key devices shaping what has come to be known as “global contemporary art,” an art shaped by the new relations of production that surrounded the making of art under global neoliberalism. Throughout this book I will use the term *biennial conversions* to designate the countless turns and exchanges between artistic genealogies that, motivated by this cosmopolitan optimism, would ultimately allow for the development of global contemporary art as we know it.<sup>9</sup>

These biennial conversions were historically situated in the geopolitical reorderings at place. The period's desires for cosmopolitan unity held important contradictions at their core: although for many the end of the Cold War offered a historical opportunity to put an end to decades, if not centuries, of conflict, many others knew well that forms of slow and fast violence would continue to unfold as a new world order took shape. Many victories had taken place during the Cold War that escaped large-scale narratives centering the US-versus-USSR axis; countless wars would mark the following years of presumed world peace.<sup>10</sup> The cultural field was not exempt from these competing views, which greatly shaped the resurgence of the art biennial as an exhibition form favored by many. On the one hand, supporters of early-boom biennials presented themselves as facilitators of an inclusive and

universal art world. Curators, regional backing elites, publics, artists, and administrators endeavored to craft a form for displaying art that mirrored the wide artistic diversity of a world in rapid change. On the other hand, these actors were culturally situated, just like everyone else, which created the challenge of how to best translate and value differences across cultural frameworks while simultaneously escaping their own inherited biases.

*Biennial conversions* refers to these discursive and material efforts to accommodate and value difference, while simultaneously prefiguring a pacified world through the cyclical temporality of globally oriented art exhibitions. These conversions entailed the selective inclusion of cultural practices from outside elite, white-centric North Atlantic art worlds into the loci of the new global exhibitionary complex. Welcoming these cultural practices in these new frameworks prompted their adaptation to codes that were legible to and appreciated by the new global cosmopolitans—de facto audiences and patrons of the nascent global contemporary art industry. The discursive work happening within early-boom biennials facilitated these conversions. At best, they enriched artistic repertoires and widened the scope of what was institutionally distinguished as art. When successful, biennial conversions led to the creation of new art historical categories (or the revamping of existing ones under a new guise) that superseded the nation and enabled the circulation, legitimation, and valorization of artworks, artists, and experts in supranational networks that extended beyond the specific sociocultural contexts in which they had originated.

As I describe in detail in this book, some of these new artistic categories—such as “Third World avant-garde,” “Border art,” and “new European art”—attempted to incorporate artistic genealogies that had developed in parallel to each other as well as the dominant North Atlantic art genealogy, partly as facets of historical socialist revolutions, and now met in these new art spaces with global aspirations. Yet biennial conversions were not seamless or politically neutral. In their reframing of aesthetic value they required concessions, cuts, exclusions, and alterations of the cultural objects and genealogies that had previously been excluded from dominant North Atlantic art worlds. These filterings and adaptations often left behind not only important material and immaterial aspects of the cultural practices that were targeted for inclusion but also, most importantly, the situated values, meanings, and social purposes that originated them. As foundations for the eventual constitution of a *global* exhibitionary complex, globally oriented art biennials entailed important losses.

These biennial conversions were a post–Cold War articulation of a longer and more general process that I call “aesthetic conversions.” Aesthetic conversions involve the reframing of an object under a new aesthetic paradigm. They are historically situated negotiations that reidentify, reorient, and reorder the function, meaning, and value of culture. More generally, aesthetic conversions are a common process in the production of art as experienced in North Atlantic modernity. Often shaped by structural determinations that condition how objects and actors enter new spaces of circulation in a given context, these conversions facilitate the repeated displacement of artifacts, practices, and symbols across geographical and categorical lines. A core feature of Western European and US elite art worlds throughout modernity, these displacements are likely familiar to many readers of this book. They include, for example, the incorporation of African masks into the portraits of European cubist painters and the inclusion of weaving and crocheting into the art canon by feminist artists throughout the twentieth century. Such displacements have repeatedly shaken art-world audiences, many of whom are initially unable to reconcile the newly incorporated objects and symbols with their preexisting understandings of what constitutes “art.” In this way, aesthetic conversions were integral to many avant-garde movements in elite, white-centric North Atlantic art worlds during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Aesthetic conversions are supported through a combination of discursive work and display maneuvers. That is, they are intrinsically tied to art’s predication to exhibitionary logics—in their different formulations within diverse reception spaces through time. By distinguishing a variety of phenomena as art within socially revered exhibition frameworks, aesthetic conversions can have positive consequences, such as upholding for public appreciation cultural forms and social phenomena that had been formerly denied cultural worthiness by dominant art institutions. For instance, it is through aesthetic conversions that the art institution incorporates the work of contemporary artists with disabilities—a much-needed move resulting from the sustained advocacy and labor of practitioners, curators, and art historians.<sup>11</sup> But aesthetic conversions can also have negative effects, especially when framed exclusively by formalist valuation standards, a too-common misstep that tends to conceal colonial and extractivist relations.<sup>12</sup> By erasing and distorting the situated meanings and social practices that contributed to the creation of specific objects, aesthetic

conversions can deny publics the opportunity to substantively learn about ways of experiencing the world that are different from their own and exclude the situated value of culture beyond dominant aesthetic frameworks. Moreover, this severing of objects from their social and cultural conditions of production is often unbalanced and tends to benefit the preservation of hegemonic perspectives over other ways of life—most often to the benefit of elite, white-centric, Western European and US culture. A good portion of this book examines this tendency of aesthetic conversions to erase and distort local worldviews in the context of early-boom biennials.

Like translations, aesthetic conversions transfer the meanings and values of culture. However, through their capacity to turn into art objects previously denied such status, aesthetic conversions have ontological implications. The history of modern art is ripe with examples of seemingly nonartistic objects, places, and relations that, when subject to aesthetic conversions, acquire artistic status and are welcomed into socially revered cultural frameworks. Aesthetic conversions also affect the formal and material qualities of artworks. For example, artists from a region formerly marginal to dominant art worlds may suddenly embrace the use of a specific material that was previously unavailable to them yet is popular in mainstream exhibition circuits, thus altering the practices of art production, circulation, collection, and preservation. As well, aesthetic conversions shape other important processes involved in the production of art, such as the professional practices of art-world actors, including curators, artists, administrators, handlers, and critics; forms of audience engagement; and the design of exhibition spaces. For example, the collector-driven demand for large-scale installations and photographs in the early 2000s triggered the emergence of highly specialized technicians who developed unique production processes. Importantly, as this book shows, aesthetic conversions are dialogical: they happen in relation, transforming both hegemonic and subaltern repertoires, albeit with an eschewed bias that tends to preserve the superiority of aesthetic paradigms dominant in the reception spaces that frame each conversion. As a result, an analytical focus on aesthetic conversions draws attention to the inherent power relations that are brought forward or tamed down in acts of cultural exchange and inclusion. As later chapters demonstrate, artistic genealogies that were previously excluded from hegemonic art worlds often end up losing their original emancipatory intentions, while retaining their formal attributes, when they are converted for inclusion in new exhibition spaces.

Though operating in very different locations and conditions, the biennial conversions that took place in the post–Cold War years continued a long history of aesthetic conversions in ways that were particular to the conditions of their time. If former moments in this history had helped tie initially para-institutional avant-garde artworks to nation-building projects through their eventual acquisition by national museums, biennial conversions helped articulate contemporary artworks to cultural, economic, and political supranational projects—participating in the early moments of late twentieth-century cultural globalization. The aesthetic conversions that contributed to the formation of national artistic canons through the institutional form of the museum infused a teleological temporization to the unfolding of artistic forms, from which a national art history existed in parallel to the imagined foundation, longevity, and prehistory of a nation. By contrast, biennial conversions infused the duration of two years as the unit to pace changes in artistic discourses, forms, and standards. The modern Hegelian vector was now a centrifugal spiral speeding in cycles of exponential capital growth. These biennial conversions renewed the formal and thematic qualities of art in elite, white-centric North Atlantic art worlds, upholding them as a joint sphere of meaning making that reflected the time’s post–Cold War global cosmopolitanism. In so doing, biennial conversions became particularly engrained in the relations of production that surrounded the “art” category in this period of cultural globalization. Increasing numbers of art actors within the early-boom biennials practiced new forms of art labor marked by the principles of deregulation, market-driven demand, and mystified mobility prevalent within neoliberalism. As we will see in the chapters that follow, biennials in noncapitalist spaces, such as the Bienal de La Habana, offered a political counter-model to these neoliberal labor practices, whereas *Manifesta* and *inSITE* incorporated them more organically from their peripheral contexts.

These biennial conversions helped convert cultural forms practiced outside of elite North Atlantic art worlds into codes that would be legible to the new global art publics, whose understandings and appreciation of art were very much tied to aesthetic valuation standards and practices dominating in elite, white-centric North Atlantic art worlds. By displacing cultural productions outside of their original emplacement and adapting them into new paradigms of aesthetic value, these conversions facilitated the renewal of the North Atlantic modernist-formalist canon and its end-of-the-century legacies. They fed contemporary art production within the

early-boom biennials with formal, thematic, and conceptual elements that had been produced in regional art genealogies until then mostly overlooked by or excluded from dominating art worlds in Western Europe and the United States. Ultimately, these conversions played an important role in the production of new parameters for the valuation of artistic merit.

Importantly, the discursive labor of artists, critics, curators, and historians played a crucial role in the conversion of cultural productions into artworks, granting them value as potential collectibles in a growing global art market. Yet it would be in art fairs, not in art biennials, where these converted objects would be exchanged not on the basis of their use value but rather according to their presumed uniqueness, discursive sophistication, and proximity to their author. Global contemporary artworks follow a market logic similar to that of luxury and heritage goods. According to Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, buyers and sellers of these exclusive goods respond to factors such as the object's novelty in relation with a tradition; its authenticity, vis-à-vis a specific regional or national identity; and an aura of exceptionality.<sup>13</sup> Seldom displayed alone, these exceptional objects move within coveted spheres of circulation, such as the biennial circuit, where their closeness to reputable actors—artists, curators, collectors, and art historians—aids in their distinction. Through the production of theories that justified their curatorial selections, early biennial curators composed compelling arguments for the conversion of previously extra-artistic symbolic orders into the permeable space of the art biennial. In doing so, they delivered discursive resources that art dealers and other participants in art markets used to valorize and distinguish art objects as luxury goods.

Sustained through time, these biennial conversions would ultimately yield at the turn of the century what Caroline A. Jones has called a “platform formalism” in global art biennials.<sup>14</sup> For example, in Rotterdam in 1996 they helped recompose Europe's manifold modernisms as new pan-European contemporary art anchored in commonalities found in artworks from western, eastern, northern, and southern European regions. Furthermore, through these displacements biennials converted extra-artistic elements of everyday life into institutionally legitimized art phenomena. These conversions distinguished these elements as worthy of aesthetic appreciation, enriching their value and extending their capacity for circulation in the art institution. These processes of aesthetic conversion were especially important at the borders of North Atlantic liberalism.

In San Diego and Tijuana in 1994 they took place through the commissioning of site-specific artworks that would disclose to foreign audiences particular qualities of place—such as the everyday forms of interpersonal communication across the iron fence at the international border. Taken together, the three biennials studied in this book helped convert artistic genealogies that had been produced in the aftermath of three historical socialist revolutions—the Mexican Revolution, the Soviet Revolution, and the Cuban Revolution—into North Atlantic modernism’s late twentieth-century formal inheritances.

By thematizing aspects of everyday life and featuring them as forms and materials in artworks, early-boom biennials aided in the selective bracketing of more and more aspects of regional sociocultural commons, rendering them legible to a global art audience in formation. As we will see, early-boom biennials often promised art-mediated encounters with local authenticity to nonlocal visitors and helped connect local histories with present concerns by facilitating opportunities to participate in the new and exciting scenarios of so-called global art. Eventually, thanks in part to processes of biennial conversion, many early-boom biennial artworks and artists were able to access an expanding global art market. In gaining this access, they were subject to processes of valorization shepherded by curators and other cultural brokers as part of their conversion into ecumenically legible codes. As the following chapters show, these processes were far from clean and linear; they often involved on-the-ground negotiations between a number of actors, negotiations that grew from diverging expectations about how to interpret widely held desires for convergence.

## Biennials in Context

Early-boom biennials helped bring forth and standardize newly powerful ways of selecting and valorizing contemporary art, but they also reactivated a familiar avant-garde aspiration: the desire to merge art and life. As subsequent chapters document, curators working for early-boom biennials attempted to prefigure a world of friendship and conviviality after the Cold War by commissioning artworks that, in their majority, looked toward *everyday* symbols, relations, and materials. They also attempted to reimagine the particular geographic regions that hosted each exhibit as integral to, rather than cut off from, an emerging world order. Although each biennial pursued different reconciliatory aims, their approaches shared an

inclination toward site-specificity that attempted to incorporate aspects of everyday life in their regions into the new regional art categories that the biennials themselves were helping to construct. Mirroring the more general optimism of the moment, cultural and political elites from around the world embraced art biennials as a seemingly benign and forward-looking way to help realize their hopes for a convivial and inclusive future. During its first decade, between 1984 and 1994, the Bienal de La Habana, for example, translated into the aesthetic field what had been a decades-long effort on behalf of Cuba's political elites to consolidate Cuba's leadership in Third World solidarity campaigns.<sup>15</sup> Its organizers, who were supported by the Cuban state, researched the contemporary art production of subaltern peoples from around the world in order to offer international audiences a distinctively Third World avant-garde that challenged the exclusionary epistemic principles of North Atlantic modernisms. Likewise, between 1994 and 2005, inSITE amplified deep-seated interests by regional elites to reimagine the US-Mexico borderlands as a region of conciliation and conviviality, despite escalating reinforcement of the geographic boundary between the nations by the Mexican and US federal governments. The exhibition was an operation of unprecedented capacity for regional art institutions that aimed to attract international audiences to a region that was frequently overshadowed by more prominent art centers, such as Los Angeles and Mexico City. In doing so, the organizers reformed the preexisting label of "Border art" so that they could bring together manifold local artistic traditions, chiefly the emancipatory artistic practices legacy of the Chicano art movement, with artistic repertoires that were imported from the North Atlantic art capitals. In 1996 in Rotterdam, Manifesta's first iteration responded to the post-Maastricht policy framework driving cultural and identity integration in the newly formed European Union. Sponsored by regional philanthropy and government officials on the municipal, national, and supranational levels, Manifesta attempted to join Europe's diverse modern art genealogies into a common project, namely of creating a distinctively European approach to contemporary art.

Unlike the museum or the gallery, which had claimed art as a rarified and autonomous field, early-boom art biennials expressed an explicit intention to acknowledge and value their surrounding locales and to be inclusive of cultural forms and practices that had been historically excluded from canonical art institutions. They largely attempted to do so in two ways. First, they often embraced what has come to be known in the art world as

site-specificity, a tendency of art making that, in Miwon Kwon's account, celebrates the cultural and physical attributes of particular places that surround the walls of supposedly esoteric spaces such as the gallery and the museum. Second, and relatedly, they sometimes promoted artists who relied on collaboration and dialogue with non-artists and nondominant groups to help orchestrate a more equal and just world—a genre of art making that Grant Kester calls “dialogical aesthetics.” The three early-boom biennials chronicled in this book did in principle attempt to engage with local cultural practices and deploy dialogical methods that seemingly valued mutual recognition and empathy as a way to mend social ills. However, and as scholars such as George Yúdice have shown and I further explore in this volume, the class affiliations of influential actors within the early-boom biennials often had the effect of watering down and sometimes erasing the inclusionary intentions and liberatory drives behind the dialogical aesthetic framework. In doing so, although they sometimes expressed their heteronomous engagement with site as the practice of solidarity, early-boom biennials ultimately contributed to a nascent ecumenical multiculturalism that ironically accentuated already existing social divisions and relations of coloniality.<sup>16</sup>

The organic alliances that developed among biennial curators, biennial organizers, and supporting political and economic elites in the regions where the exhibitions were placed were important contributors to this unintended result that I explore in this book. I will argue that by publicly embracing a rhetoric of dialogical heteronomy and site-specificity but engaging in social selection and cultural distinction, the early-boom biennials became a highly effective and malleable operation that, on one hand, could graft itself on to the situated social complexities of a wide array of cultural practices and social scenarios across the world while, on the other hand, extending the exclusionary logics and cultural hierarchies that had long characterized elite, white-centric, North Atlantic art institutions to new areas and regions.

### Early-Boom Biennials

Like their immediate precursors, the nineteenth-century international expositions, art biennials have long provided their visitors with highly particular imaginings of the world as a totality. Caroline A. Jones has traced the commonalities between these two kinds of exhibitions in detail: their “presumed universality, goals of knowledge production, ties to tourism,

implications for urban infrastructure, regulation of international art-world trade routes, rehabilitation—through the cosmopolitan city—of previously restrictive or totalitarian regimes, and openings for multinational capital investment and new geopolitical ambitions, all in paradoxical conjunction with local political purposes.”<sup>17</sup> The first of many international expositions opened in the middle of the nineteenth century in London and Paris, marking these two capitals’ imperial rivalry. Art was featured in these expositions from the beginning, alongside thousands of objects of science and nature, all of them indexing their respective nation’s imperial reach and domestic industrialization. In the first, London’s Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations (1851), art objects were installed throughout the exhibition’s many booths and helped guide visitors through the pavilion. Four years later, at the Exposition Universelle des Produits de l’Agriculture, de l’Industrie et des Beaux-Arts in Paris (1855), art received a dedicated pavilion as a separate state-sanctioned category—famously prompting a reaction by Gustave Courbet, who in a first act of vanguardist self-determination against the exclusive criteria of the macro-exhibition inaugurated his own Pavillon du Réalisme across the street, to the great satisfaction of the curious Parisian public. Art biennials appeared soon after: 1895 was the inaugural year of the Biennale de Venezia (Italy), followed in 1896, by the first Carnegie International Exhibition (Pittsburgh, United States). In keeping with the Eurocentric worldviews of their sponsors—Venetian aristocracy for the former and North American industrialist oligarchy for the latter—these exhibitions surveyed what their organizers deemed to be state-of-the-art artistic production in Europe and the United States, thus reproducing the imperialist world visions that had scaffolded international exhibitions in these same regions.<sup>18</sup>

For more than fifty years, the Biennale de Venezia and the Carnegie International Exhibition were the only two recurring biennials, but the onset of the Cold War sparked what Charles Green and Anthony Gardner call “the second wave” of biennials. These new biennials included the Bienal de São Paulo (Brazil, 1951), the Biennale de la Méditerranée in Alexandria (Mediterranean Biennial, Egypt, 1955), Ljubljana’s Biennale Grafike (Biennial of Graphic Arts, Slovenia 1955), and documenta (Kassel, West Germany, 1955), among others. Remarkably, documenta aspired to heal political divides, at least symbolically, by being strategically placed near the border between East Germany and West Germany, and by appealing to audiences from both sides of the Iron Curtain. Since documenta 5 (1972), curated

by Harald Szeemann, art biennials also became a breeding ground for the independent biennial curator, a figure who would become the paradigmatic art actor during the 1990s biennial boom. As Green and Gardner have described, Szeemann stopped pursuing art-historical validation and asserted the curatorial as an autonomous field invested in the production of its own canon. His defiance of artists' intentions and art-historical categories turned the space of the exhibition into a field for the deployment of innovative curatorial narratives to be experienced and interpreted by audiences in phenomenological encounters with the curated art objects.<sup>19</sup>

Conversely, São Paulo, Ljubljana, and Alexandria hosted the first biennials outside of Western Europe and the United States, and they helped advance alternative internationalisms in the artistic field.<sup>20</sup> São Paulo played an important role in making Brazilian art visible abroad while simultaneously importing artistic developments from Western Europe and the United States.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Ljubljana and Alexandria rejected, in their own ways, the influence of North Atlantic liberalism to mirror contemporaneous efforts at state formation that pursued international alliances with other Third World nations. If Ljubljana exemplified Yugoslavia's nonaligned socialism, Alexandria commemorated the anniversary of the 1952 Egyptian Revolution. As the Cold War progressed, more biennial exhibitions slowly emerged, such as the Biennale de Paris (Paris Biennial, 1959–1985) and the Sydney Biennial (1973), which continues to this day and from its beginning was one of the first biennials to embrace Szeemann's thematic curating, instead of Venice's national pavilion model.<sup>22</sup> However, the "biennial boom," the aforementioned rapid multiplication of the biennial form worldwide sometimes also referred to as "biennialization," would not occur until the last decade of the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> During this period an astonishing proliferation of art biennials would bring the exhibition form to Shanghai, Gwangju, Istanbul, Johannesburg, Berlin, Liverpool, Lyon, Dakar, and many, many, many other sites.

Throughout this book I use the term *early-boom biennials* to speak of those biennial exhibitions that took place in the early years of the art biennial boom. Echoing the magic of the moment, these events articulated in the realm of curatorial practice the widely held belief that a convergence of diverse artistic forms could help heal historical wounds and prefigure social unity. Unlike their immediate predecessors, they anticipated new supranational relations that promised to surpass the Cold War geopolitical order—only incorporating terms such as *global* and *globalization* in their

discursive repertoires after the mid-1990s. Reflecting the period's general cosmopolitan optimism, early-boom biennials performed a dual function: they facilitated the development of regional art scenes, and they broadened the category of art to include artistic modernisms hitherto excluded from the North Atlantic art capitals. As noted, the new biennials were both an expansion of and an alternative to the museum. The three case studies discussed in this book attest to the benefits brought about by these exhibitions, chiefly by their diversification of the global artistic archive, by helping dynamize new art scenes, and by spearheading new networks to connect formerly separate art worlds. These were important contributions that have helped to value local expertise and, at times, bring about substantial infrastructural improvements.

Embracing the revisions to curatorial practice proposed by the new museological turn of the 1980s, early-boom biennials helped expand the art institution outward toward its surrounding locales. But they also marked a transition away from the museum and its founding allegiances with the nation-state by relying on the curation of art objects to amplify the new supranational political programs. For instance, the Bienal de La Habana (1984) sought to produce a new Third World avant-garde that would support Cuba's Third World solidarity agenda; inSITE (1994) was a festival of site-specific art that hoped to showcase the changing qualities of the US-Mexico borderlands in response to the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, 1993); and Manifesta (1996), in its roving locations, aimed to showcase a new pan-European identity that dovetailed with the unification agenda of the Treaty on European Union (1992).

It would take until the turn of the century for the processes of institutional isomorphism to yield something close to a standardized art biennial model, a "global design" to use Walter D'Amico's term, that would be replicated throughout the world with adaptable variations.<sup>24</sup> However, it was the end of the Cold War that prompted the rearrangements of political power and institutionalized curatorial practice that triggered important transformations to the processes and constituencies involved in the production of this thing we call "art." These rearrangements accelerated flows of elite art professionals and ideas throughout the planet in ways that often mirrored the unequal distribution of power and resources that can be found in so many areas of the world today.<sup>25</sup> During this time of growing Western European and US influence worldwide, boom biennials often revived the tightly knit bond between imperialist aspirations and display cultures of

nineteenth-century international expositions, conferring global dimensions to what Tony Bennett has termed the “exhibitionary complex.”<sup>26</sup> They did so, chiefly, by proposing visions of artistic production that were seemingly inclusive of aesthetic diversity. In most cases, however, their efforts tacitly asserted the dominance of elite, white-centric North Atlantic modernisms and their legacies over other aesthetic paradigms. I record the details of this nuanced but important implication in the historical chapters that follow.

## Biennials at the Borders of Liberalism

The three cases that I explore in this book attest to how the borders of Cold War liberalism were especially ripe terrain for early-boom biennials. Placed in strategic locations at what were then the edges of North Atlantic liberal hegemony, these exhibitions helped propel the centrifugal expansion of biennials to new lands in the incipient cycle of neoliberal globalization. The border, as a symbol and a physical entity, was often a feature of these exhibitions, which operated as a porous membrane that simultaneously blocked and enabled the selective filtering of relations, forms, and values between diverse aesthetic genealogies. In this sense, early-boom biennials echoed Étienne Balibar’s characterization of the border as a polysemic and heterogeneous space that demarcates and territorializes, prompting processes of aesthetic conversion that would help North Atlantic liberalism expand to new lands.<sup>27</sup> Early-boom biennials supported this work of reterritorializing and expanding economic and political arrangements, but they did so by operating through a seemingly autonomous sphere: that of so-called high culture. Even an initially anticapitalist biennial, such as the Bienal de La Habana, eventually succumbed to the trends of the global contemporary art industry once the Soviet Union, Cuba’s main economic ally when the exhibition was created, was no longer a player in the international field.

Thinking of the early-boom biennial as a border operation that selectively frames and filters the flows of aesthetic repertoires correlates to the heightened presence of migration as a theme in artworks and exhibitions throughout the decade. Many biennial artworks registered the time’s interest in migration as a function of globalization, sometimes representing migrant subjects and at other times addressing related processes of cultural hybridity. Additionally, both early-boom biennials and their artworks often

reflected the protagonism of supranational formations over modern nation-states during this stage of globalization. In addition to the exhibitions included in this study that celebrated supranational treaties such as the Non-Aligned Bloc, the European Union, or NAFTA, Terry Smith remarks that many of the artworks that circulated in these transnational networks registered, in a variety of ways, responses to processes of postcolonial state formation and decolonization.<sup>28</sup> Partly structural, partly arising from artists' own quasi-autonomous concerns, this responsiveness to the interruption of the modern institutionalized bond between art production and national identity turned global contemporary art into a vortex for myriad aesthetic repertoires coproduced in local, regional, national, and transnational relations.

Propelled by the cosmopolitan aspirations of their organizers, early-boom biennials both entered into and helped construct exclusive supranational networks for the circulation of objects, knowledge, professionals, and private capital during neoliberal expansion in the 1990s.<sup>29</sup> By successfully grafting a regional art scene into these existing networks, regional cultural and economic elites could access exclusive social networks that spanned the planet, as the nascent network itself expanded to new regions and territories. In this way the early-boom biennials helped shape the globalized art industry as we now know it, as well as the cosmopolitan habitus that predominates within it. But these outcomes were not the stated aims of many of the people who were instrumental to the production and spread of the early-boom biennials. Rather, a contagious cosmopolitan idealism that grew in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War often provided political, economic, and cultural elites in the early to mid-1990s with ideological motivation and justification for their expansionary endeavors. After all, like other cosmopolitans throughout history, these individuals believed that agreement on aesthetic matters signaled moral convergence between diverse actors. According to this framework, which through Immanuel Kant's formulation became foundational for European aesthetics, agreeing on the aesthetic value of works by canonical turn-of-the-century artists, such as El Anatsui or Candida Höfer, became more than a singular appreciation for the inherent qualities of concrete objects: it also signaled the existence of a common sense—that is, a more-or-less shared epistemic, moral, and aesthetic framework among members of an incipient community of global cosmopolitans. The artistic forms that circulated within the global biennial circuit during the 1990s and early 2000s were frequently presented in specialized media as

exemplifying an aesthetic—and thus moral—universalism for a globalizing era. Some neo-Kantian promoters of cosmopolitanism, such as Thierry de Duve, reflected the enthusiasm of many global cosmopolitans for art biennials as *glocal* sites where the tacit sharing of aesthetic judgment facilitated the participation of globally oriented municipal actors into a nascent global community of biennial patrons.<sup>30</sup>

Yet community belonging, including to the coveted global art world, is also negotiated on the basis of individuals' dexterous expressions of aesthetic taste.<sup>31</sup> Aware of this tendency, artists and scholars from outside hegemonic art worlds have long problematized the dangers of aesthetic universalisms for their historically racist, sexist, and classist biases. For example, curator Okwui Enwezor understood well, and early on, the symbolic and practiced rampages concealed by the global turn in curatorial practice, yet chose to wield the term in the benefit of further diversifying the field while acknowledging the limitations of his intervention.<sup>32</sup> Aware of these risks, artist Luis Camnitzer has noted that practicing the aesthetic codes dominant in the so-called global art world entails incorporating its hegemonic language and its production practices. Similarly, artist Rasheed Araeen has argued that during the biennial-boom art world, actors whose journeys began outside of North Atlantic centers of power continued to wrestle with an inherently white Eurocentric aesthetic framework that was exclusionary of aesthetic difference yet welcoming of identity diversity—a tension that often reinforced historical relations of coloniality but that was cloaked behind so-called universalist programs. Araeen's analysis lends support to Craig Calhoun's point that "as a social condition, cosmopolitanism is not universalism; it is belonging to a social class able to identify itself with the universal." In my approach to the global I thus side with these views and join recent art-historical critiques of the universalist character that is often automatically conferred to the global, such as the one written by art historian Amelia Jones.<sup>33</sup> The following chapters depart from an understanding that all art worlds are particular and historically situated, including hegemonic ones. Further, they account for several instances where artists and artworks originated outside of North Atlantic modern aesthetic genealogies clashed with the tacit norms informing dominating approaches to late-century cosmopolitanism.

This book builds on these critiques of cosmopolitanism to show how affinities between curatorial expertise and local elites in the early-boom biennials resuscitated the contradictions already present in earlier

cosmopolitan programs, thus privileging access and agency to local elites in the formation of local and global art worlds. These organic partnerships between art experts and internationally oriented regional elites were formed through the envisioning, manufacture, and staging of these exhibitions. Together, they brokered mutual access into and helped construct the emerging circuits of elite culture and economic power that we today recognize as the global contemporary art world. Further, these art exhibitions shaped turn-of-the-millennium notions of art labor, artistic autonomy, and art's relation to capital.<sup>34</sup> Across the world, market-oriented economic and political reforms in the 1980s and 1990s facilitated renewed alliances among regional governments, business leaders, and the cultural sector that eased the flow of capital and culture within and through their borders. These transformations helped forge a new class of art patrons and collectors that were members of (or hoped to join) a new global elite that William Robinson characterizes as regional dominant groups with aspirations to access new circuits for the global circulation of capital, culture, and political influence.<sup>35</sup> During the early post-Cold War years, culture was again a key sphere for reorganizing power on supranational and regional levels. Cultural institutions, including early-boom biennials, supported new regional articulations of power by helping to galvanize legitimacy and consent on the local level around the new world-peace aspirations of political and economic elites. One important outcome of these operations was the inclusion of art forms and artists from regions previously off-limits to the hegemonic art institution into a new canon in formation. As this book shows, these inclusions were never seamless, and they often involved subtle yet often coercive maneuvers of conversion into dominant frameworks for the valuation of artistic merit.

Another important consequence of early-boom biennials was their impact in the production of a common sense beyond the limits of art worlds. Art's power to reframe the meanings of identities, land, and culture afforded early-boom biennials ideological agency, involving these operations in the consolidation of hegemony at the borders of liberalism. The meanings and values that naturalize everyday experience, what we call "common sense," are organized through permanent negotiations between actors in competing social positions. Always historical and mutable, common sense is indicative of the temporary symbolic order that cements hegemony and is a key tool to understand how art biennials participated in the new regional configurations of power that set forth end-of-the-century

Western European and United States neocolonial programs.<sup>36</sup> I am far from the first analyst to remark on the relation between global contemporary art and hegemony. Recently, Oliver Marchart has explored biennials' entanglements with hegemony around the case of Kassel-based quinquennial documenta.<sup>37</sup> In the same way that Alexander Alberro and Amelia Jones articulate, from different positions, I believe that exploring the entanglements of contemporary art worlds in the production of hegemony allows us to see not only the many internal contradictions that inform contemporary art but, importantly as well, the diversity of subject positions and political agencies that contribute to its formation—some involved in the consolidation of hegemony, others invested in its dismantlement or reformation.<sup>38</sup>

In line with the importance of the border in the early-boom biennial, my inquiry into how these operations participated in the production of new hegemonic orders leads me to Jorge González's dialogical model of the "cultural fronts." González continues a long line of subaltern Marxist thought that takes culture as the privileged field of struggle between competing worldviews and moral orders. Building on Gramsci, he defines hegemony as the "momentum of the objective relationships of forces that exist between different social agent . . . situated in a determined social space which we observe from a symbolic point of view—that is, where the creation and recreation of meanings take form in the enactment of all social relations."<sup>39</sup> González designates as "centripetal" the symbolic frameworks put forward by institutionalized expertise and as "centrifugal" those defended from the bottom up by everyday actors. When centripetal and centrifugal forces wield a synchronous symbolic repertoire, they reflect a condition of hegemony. This opening up of the concept of hegemony from its classical macro-political focus allows accounting for everyday life experience and demonstrates that hegemony is always ultimately accomplished through symbolic negotiations of quotidian order—such as in the site-specific biennials that favored artworks concerned with everyday life experience. Amid this climate, these exhibitions played a key role in reimagining the everyday lives of subaltern groups into codes that were legible to the new global elites.

To date, most analyses of art biennials consider how the institutionalized discursive expertise of curators reshapes the symbolic orders *within* the art institution. In this book I build on those contributions to show how on-the-ground (centrifugal) dialogical practices like those carried out by members of a squat art space in Rotterdam *and* institutional (centripetal)

agendas of political convergence became synchronized in their joint commitment to a better world thanks to the mediation of biennial curatorial practice. This synchronicity was achieved in diverse ways. In the Bial de La Habana, for example, synchronicity happened through the formulation of a “Third World avant-garde” that blurred the categorical boundaries between popular art, craft, avant-garde art, and the many expressions of modern art found outside of North Atlantic elite art worlds. Through the commission of site-specific artworks, inSITE bracketed material and relational aspects of life and space at the US-Mexico borderlands for their exhibition to foreign audiences. In the Rotterdam Manifesta, the process entailed the inclusion of artistic projects started by members of the local art community to claim a place in the exhibition’s program as a way to protest and reverse their initial exclusion from the curatorial selection.

Like museums and other art institutions, early-boom biennials sought to facilitate contacts between separate cultural and artistic worlds. Yet these contacts exposed the uneven power relations shaping actors’ access to and aesthetic sovereignty within the exhibition space.<sup>40</sup> Mediating between North Atlantic modernist genealogies and cultural paradigms originated outside these regions, the early-boom biennials that I document in this book acted as liminal frontier operations that staged the crafting, partly via contemporary art, of a new common sense for a cosmopolitan class in the making. These conversions consolidated the diverse symbolic referents of differently situated groups under seemingly benign and inclusive labels such as “Border art” (in its mid-1990s refurbishing), “European art,” and “Third World avant-garde.” As we shall see, the production of such labels designated moments in the consolidation of Western European and US hegemony worldwide.

## The Book’s Structure

At the end of the Cold War, art biennials at the borders of liberalism helped imagine a new reconciled world. The time’s confident embrace of this until-then marginal exhibition form propelled it to become the dominant staging ground for contemporary art by the end of the century. In their widening the scope of the “art” category, early-boom biennials visibilized artworks and artists from sites previously excluded from the North Atlantic-centric art institution. This inclusionary move often came, alas, at the expense of faithfulness to the values and intentions fueling cultural genealogies

outside this region, which would be dramatically reshaped, if not lost, in their inclusion in the new global art institutional complex. In this rapidly changing world, local elites in these liminal regions grasped this exhibition form as an avenue through which to reimagine their locales and help leverage their positionality in a new world order. The renewed alliance between globally oriented local elites and artistic production contributed to the formation of a new social class of global cosmopolitans who became ideal audiences of the soon-to-be omnipresent biennial exhibition form. These aesthetic and social processes were simultaneous with the reevaluation of the centrality of the nation-state and the promotion of supranational formations as ideal polities for a new global order. Embracing the myth of free circulation for capital and culture, this revamped internationalism accentuated already existing forms of inequity and coloniality between peoples and eased the appearance of new ones. In this book I provide detailed analysis of how these big processes materialized in the situatedness of three early-boom biennials: the Bienal de La Habana, inSITE, and Manifesta.

The book has three parts. Each considers a particular dimension of the early-boom biennial, taking as case studies the germinal iterations of the Bienal de La Habana, inSITE, and Manifesta. Each chapter details different ways in which biennial conversions helped prefigure a unified world and the end of the Cold War. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 look at the anti-colonial biennial conversions in place in the Bienal de La Habana, an art biennial founded to spearhead avenues for the circulation and valuation of art autonomously from the influence of North Atlantic modernisms. Although this counter-hegemonic operation ultimately succumbed to the logics driving the period's large-scale geopolitical processes, these chapters show how socialist ideology, in both its orthodox and nonorthodox versions, informed the ideals, practices, and artwork selection within the exhibition. Chapter 1 explores how the Bienal translated to the artistic field the Cuban government's doctrine of Third World solidarity, challenging the time's dominant North Atlantic-centric art world and opening avenues for the legitimation of subaltern culture worldwide. Chapter 2 expands on the centrality of collaboration for the first iterations of the Bienal to show how the exhibition put forward a practice-led understanding of socialist theory that differed from Fidel Castro's Leninist approach. The chapter shows how the organization of curatorial expertise in the Bienal mirrored the military strategy of *foquismo* and relied on dynamic alliances between local and transnational constituencies to produce situated transferable knowledge.

Chapter 3 evaluates how the category of craft anchored the proposal of an anticolonial revision to the North Atlantic-centric art canon in the early iterations of the Bienal, subverting taxonomies that historically facilitated the exclusion of artists from other world regions from the spaces of artistic legitimization. The biennial conversions at place within this effort helped redraw socialist aesthetics and show how, despite their shared efforts to group diverse artistic genealogies in regional art categories, not all early-boom biennials necessarily embraced neoliberal globalization, but some helped imagine an internationalism of the subaltern instead.

Sprouting at the frontiers of liberalism, early-boom art biennials also bore important territorial implications: they helped ground political agendas to sites. Precisely because of their placement at the borders of Western Europe and the United States, these exhibitions were able to prefigure life otherwise in regions that would soon adopt neoliberal policy frameworks. The second part of this book considers inSITE, a festival of site-specific art in San Diego and Tijuana, and its involvement in the reimagining of space and population at the US-Mexico borderlands. Chapter 4 describes inSITE as an operation that overlooked the everyday experience of most border residents, favoring instead the perspectives of beneficiaries of the new NAFTA policy framework. Facilitating the disassociation of the category of “Border art” from its origins in Chicano civil rights activism, inSITE helped reassociate this category with artistic forms that instead trended in the globally oriented art industry. Chapter 5 studies how the global aspirations of local economic elites facilitated the sprout of art biennials across the globe. It argues that inSITE’s emphasis on site-specific art satisfied widespread desires to render the US-Mexico borderlands as a pacified region by subjecting the conflicted border zone to an aesthetic imperative. Chapter 6 discusses inSITE as an operation that facilitated the entrance of young Mexico City artists into the nascent global contemporary art industry, aiding the internationalization of the Mexican contemporary art scene through this new outpost in the *frontera norte*. In addition to changes to regional art categories, these biennial conversions facilitated by inSITE helped render land in forms that were legible to cosmopolitan art actors.

At times of political change, early-boom biennials responded to the dreams and interests of a new cosmopolitan class by joining broader efforts for the convergence of culturally, ethnically, and politically diverse constituencies under new shared myths of belonging. The third part of this book examines these processes by considering Manifesta’s involvement

in the production of a new European identity. Chapter 7 portrays Manifesta as an organization that translated the European Union's unification agenda into the spaces of so-called high art, projecting a classed project of European unity that gathered private and public interests on the municipal, national, and supranational level around the new art biennial. Furthermore, because many early-boom biennials inherited modernist defenses of the art exhibition as a bracketed conciliatory realm, they delivered images of appeasement that contrasted with ongoing conflicts outside of the art institution. Chapter 8 considers the conflicts within artworks, among professionals, and among nations that surrounded Manifesta 1 in Rotterdam (1996) and focuses on the discord between forms of curatorial practice within the biennial. It also examines the tensions that resulted from the insertion within the exhibition of artworks that relied on human relations as form. Last, in contrast with widespread art-world calls to evaluate art exhibitions as discursive productions that are detached from social life, early-boom biennials invoked—and sometimes even nourished—strong ties with their host locales, participating in their cities' everyday life. Chapter 9 centers Manifesta's investment in Rotterdam as the former industrial city worked to forge a new postindustrial identity in an era of economic globalization. The chapter shows how although the art biennial initially failed to represent Rotterdam's artistic diversity by limiting its alliances to established cultural institutions, it ultimately acknowledged cries for inclusion articulated by a faction of the local art community. The biennial conversions taking place within Manifesta 1 show how the pursuit of cultural unity often comes at the expense of silencing conflict and neutralizing critique.

This book is not a comprehensive study of the art biennial boom.<sup>41</sup> Nor is it an attempt to write a unified history of global contemporary art. Readers may take this book as a critique of this category, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's understanding of critique as a "careful description of the structures that produce an object of knowledge."<sup>42</sup> In the following pages I devote my attention to the early arrangements that *preceded* the boom of art biennials at the turn of the century. Others have written about the art biennial as a global standardized form, its entanglements with the art market, and its implications for the globalization of the art industry.<sup>43</sup> This monograph looks at the very early days of this phenomenon, times when "biennial boom" was not even a term yet, to describe how early-boom

biennials were part of larger artistic, sociocultural, and political transformations at place in a diversity of locales grappling, in their own ways, with a changing world. I chose to study the early iterations of these three biennials in order to better understand how early-boom biennials came to be, developed relations with their surrounding regions that allowed these exhibitions to become institutions, and helped imagine a pacified world through the curation of artworks. By analyzing these three different mutations of an institutional form at times of historical change, I describe only three of the many possible variations of an existing motive. Writing a biography of a single biennial felt limiting to me, in the sense that it would not have allowed me to see various solutions to an artistic problem of utmost importance at the end of the Cold War—what forms best satisfy our desire to represent a changing world—knowing that the picturing might always be biased. This is thus a partial history centered around the early iterations of three art biennials at the borders of liberalism.<sup>44</sup> I look forward to others supplementing this study by expanding its analytical scope to other geographies and shedding additional light on this critical period in recent art history.