

**Biennial in your brain:  
California might not be (t)here** Joshua Decter

Inoculated from others in the endless automotive flow of Southern California, regularly carsick and existentially flattened, seeking to understand a place that eludes definition because it refuses to cohere itself into definition, I am nowhere and everywhere within the multiple enclaves of Los Angeles. It is all work and no play, or maybe the other way around. There is no life without a pool, and yet the water supply may be in peril. Water and Power indeed. Water and Power, and Art.

Dream of New York(fornication) while in Cali(fornication). Dislocated identities, relocated geographies, but then there is always the ocean. Desalinate that body of water, create a twenty-mile-long water ride between Downtown and Venice, and paradise is sustained, at least in the L.A. environs. Maybe not.

Art and culture didn't fix the terrible gap between haves and have-nots that is palpable on the streets of Downtown L.A.; this is the impoverishment of urban public space. Not in-between space, just space with the life squeezed out of it. Drink in the contradiction between million-dollar condos and dollar-a-day transient lives, reflected daily on the surface of that shiny monument to how progressive architecture has become an aesthetic franchise.

We don't need strip mall art and culture, thank you. Do we need another biennial?

Where is California located? On the freeways between L.A. and San Diego? The underpasses of San Francisco? The subdivisions of the Inland Empire? The gated communities of Orange County? The working-class neighborhoods of East L.A.? Joshua Tree? San Ysidro? LAX? SFO? La Jolla? Watts?

Will this California Biennial provide the cultural navigation that I so dearly seek in my new half-life in Los Angeles and as I occasionally transit into San Diego, San Francisco, and other places in Cali? Will this show function as my CPS (Cultural Positioning System), supplementing my GPS? Isn't this what we generally expect from any biennial, that it provide some navigation through the forest of cultural signs, or the desert of artistic practices?

The thing about the California Biennial, of course, is that it seeks to address the practices generated within an entire state, which is perhaps both too large and too small a purview. In other words, while there is nothing per se that characterizes the state of California as "regional" (it is a region like any other place in the U.S.), the question is whether a California biennial regionalizes itself by deploying the frame of the state (i.e., either artists living/working in California or those who have produced work within the state) as an organizing principle.

If we inhabit the role of (putative) free agents within territories of neoliberal capital in order to release the energies latent within culture, where exactly are we located? And if location, considered at once materially and metaphorically, is up for grabs, so to speak, why is it necessary to rely upon the geopolitical contours of statehood to determine the parameters of an exhibition? I'm sure that the museum has posed this kind of question of itself and to others. This is not the first California Biennial, and it probably won't be the last, but why not just produce a general biennial that happens to be organized by the Orange County Museum of Art and that is inclusive of art from anywhere in the nation, or from anywhere in the world for that matter? Unless one wishes to

render California as a global state, which it is in a sense, one that embodies attributes of a globalized cultural economy, which it does, but one could make this argument about other states in the union. Wouldn't it be even more compelling to generate an interpenetration, every two years, between practices from the West Coast and those from other global regions and territories? Hey, I'm just asking.

Much has been written about the disorientations of life within globalization, pertaining to identity, geopolitics, sexuality, cultural production, and just about every category of existence and action. It's no longer we think therefore we are; now it's more like we travel and therefore we are able to inhabit various identities, various selves. We are most like ourselves when we are no longer our selves, perhaps. Life, it seems, has become one big biennial or, with somewhat diminished expectations, an art fair of the everyday. This is not meant to remystify the commonplace rituals of business or touristic travel from station to station, so to speak, but rather merely to propose that the operating code of the contemporary art world is generated in the psychological, physical, political, economic, and cultural interpenetrations of place and placelessness. This is far from a "new" phenomenon, and far more eloquent writing has been produced to trace the repercussions of such interpenetrations, for instance, regarding the hybrid identities and transitive emplacements and displacements resulting from diaspora cultures. Or the macroeconomic and microeconomic repercussions of globalized economic systems in relation to localized and delocalized conditions of labor (e.g., outsourcing). And what of the supposed "flattening" of economies in the post-Fordist, Nafta world of increasingly transnational and cross-integrated economic and, by extension, social flows? Has the biennial become part of a pan-global cultural-services industry that is becoming undifferentiated from expositions of capital-laced cultural production? Life and work in the contemporary arts have been relatively "flattened" for some time, with denizens shuttling to and fro, back and forth, from one urban node to another, generating an increasingly complex web of social, intellectual, and business relations that reveal a distinct matrix of interconnections among localized cultural conditions, resilient and eroding nation-state boundaries, transregional interplays, and interstitial frictions and liaisons, all set into motion within a global matrix that can be conceptualized on nebulously poetic terms or as a highly calibrated engine of ever-evolving processes and relations that require us to restage our assumptions about what constitutes relevant art practice and relevant exhibition models in the today of tomorrow. Know what I mean?

And so one might imagine the California Biennial occurring in some other state, in some other country, in some far-flung time zone, in a remote location, simply as an idea of an elsewhere California. The California Biennial in Shanghai, in New York, in Istanbul, or in Berlin (and conversely); the California Biennial along the Pacific coast of Mexico, the California Biennial as an idea had by someone who never knew that the California Biennial existed. The California Biennial in a supermarket, in a closet, on an airplane, on the subway, in your bed, or up in the air. Or, for that matter, bring all the other global biennials to California in the form of franchises within a strip-mall context, in a dramatic gesture of neoliberal reabsorption or reassimilation. Please don't quote

me on that idea. Anyway, the world ain't really flat actually—it is more like a sphere of overlapping rhizomic networks, perhaps analogous to the complex artistic, cultural, political, ethnic, and geologic terrains of California, which echo global enclaves.

Cali has a rich legacy of boosterism, sunshine, noir, fog, criminality, sensuous lifestyle options, beautiful homes, urban blight, social alienation, mountains, massive agriculture, a valley of technology, lakes, the Pacific, real and imagined borders. Then there's the relatively estranged sister called Mexico, freeways, highways and roads, lots of cars and houses, a churning mix of immigrant populations, economic and racial borders, gated communities, and barrios, among other features. Does anyone really know anybody else in California? And how might a California Biennial address the profound level of alienation in this state?

For that matter, does it matter anymore whether a biennial actually happens, in fact, when it is a cultural "fiction" anyway? A fiction in the sense that the "reality" of any biennial is the result of a complex evolution that is historically and ideologically constructed and determined, interconnected to the histories of the museum and the development of institutions of "public" culture (even with the proviso that every institution of "public" culture also contains its dialectic opposite, which is to say "privatized" culture). Any biennial is a construction that has staying power principally as a means of sustaining the heritage of place and tradition and the possibilities of expanded cultural capital (entrepreneurialism) and art tourism. It is about the building and/or rebuilding of a city as a cosmopolitan center (or decentered place) for the production, promotion, and display of art practices—whether this is in Cairo, Berlin, Ljubljana, Tijuana, New York, Dakar, Sharjah, or even diffracted or redistributed into various nodes within a state such as California.

Of course other models exist: the five-year plan of Documenta or the ten-year plan of Skulptur Projekte Münster. It is interesting to reread Münster through its own history—as a kind of accrual of "public" art projects within the space of that small city, or large town, over the past thirty years. This was epitomized once again by Los Angeles denizen Michael Asher's conceptual vehicle project, which subtly alluded to the contradictory conditions of sameness and difference within a situation involving historic continuity and periodic innovation/renovation—a critique of the whole (post) avant-garde ideological project. A similar logic pervaded Asher's de-/re-construction of temporary walls at the Santa Monica Museum in spring 2008 as a means of interrogating institutional history, which echoed his interrogation of authorship and institutional history within his ongoing, splendidly redundant periodic intervention within Münster. Might a city and/or institution in California rigorously adopt a Münster-like model of periodic exhibition making that engages specifically with the broader public sphere of the urban or the suburban?

Commencing in the 1990s, the Manifesta project endeavored to break with aspects of the traditional biennial mode by redistributing cultural capital, both literally and symbolically, to different cities within the new euro-area—that is, producing a European biennial. This roving approach has strengths and weaknesses, although it does tend to keep things somewhat fresher, livelier, and more unpredictable—for instance, with the

brave yet flawed attempt by the curatorial team of Manifesta 6 to produce a binational, experimental school-as-exhibition project within the context of the city of Nicosia, in Cyprus. But at the same time we can also read Manifesta as an inadvertently(?) neoliberal project within the European Community, as a kind of metanational NGO or IOC that negotiates agreements with host cities and participates in the growing and promotion of a specific urban node's localized conditions (and potential to engage in systems of globalization).

Obviously one of the inevitable side effects, if you will, of biennials and other periodic exhibitions is the power of cultural capital to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people to make pilgrimages to these events and situations, specialists and cultural tourists alike. These events generate temporary (constructed) zones of public-space experience, transitory moments of social interface that produce the real fiction of collective cultural experience. Is this what the California Biennial desires?

Such events seek to compel belief in the power of art and culture to harness the capital and energies of multiple creative agents, and yet we may grow frustrated with how to ground these temporary, ritualized displays of cultural practices into sustainable engagements. And this doesn't even begin to account for the proliferation of art fairs ... which isn't the purview of this rumination, thank goodness, although it has become apparent to all that a kind of troubling but entirely predictable intersubstitution has been under way for some years: an invasion-of-the-body-snatchers syndrome, wherein the biennial appears on the surface to resemble a biennial but actually has the soul of an art fair and, conversely, an art fair for all intents and purposes looks like an art fair but has the soul of a biennial. There really is no longer any need to deliver the false dichotomy of art markets/commerce versus something that we might fantasize exists "outside" this system of cultural capital; rather, it is still relevant to analyze how these distinct events are organized and financed, to determine how art and art practices are instrumentalized under such conditions (or, conversely, how artists may seek to reinstrumentalize the sponsoring institutions themselves).

Let five hundred biennials bloom! And so why do we continue to insist upon meeting every two years, in various parts of the world, to endeavor to find meaning in meaning in relation to various art cultures? Why has this model or structure remained such a stubborn force? Is it just another opportunity for the representation of a networking system? Ultimately a biennial, like any other exhibition, is a force field of practices; the problem is to generate an active force field, perhaps of conflicting forces, so that the energy might even disrupt the possibility of a coherent argument about a particular time, place, moment, region, or location. In other words, it should be a force field of contradiction that leads not to an implosive unification of meaning, but rather to a careful distribution of multiple possible significations that, when read in relation to one another, give us an opportunity to be more sensitive to cultural frictions. Otherwise a biennial, like any other large-scale exhibition, might be a waste of our time. And how do we recycle wasted time, on artistic or cultural terms?

Is the notion and practice of a regional (or state-based) biennial an anachronism or an opportunity ripe with the potential to launch an examination of the codes of biennials

and related exhibition projects? Is it still tenable to deploy the recuperated modernist terms of vanguardism to suggest that a biennial, state-based or otherwise, can be “experimental” in character? Of course, if the desire is to constitute something “experimental” or just innovative, in terms of curatorial methodologies and/or art practices, we would want this to be a transformative experience—that is, transformative of our understanding of a place, or a constellation of locations that together might be deemed to constitute a state, such as California.

So how do such vaporous ruminations pertain to the question of a biennial exhibition organized within the state of California? To be more precise, an exhibition event that is named the California Biennial? Think locally, act globally? Or is it think globally and act locally? And what of the regional? Where exactly is the regional located? Does the notion of the regional pertain to the geographic markers of a territorial region (e.g., a state, such as California), or are we talking about a state of mind, an ethos, a predilection for things that occupy a zone of social or ideological familiarity, that suggest a common code or shared values? Perhaps it’s best to think globally within a regional field of action and then hope that folks in other places and situations take notice of what is happening in the place(s) one is endeavoring to activate.

How does an entire state become embedded within a biennial and, conversely, a biennial within a state?

It might be worth recalling that California used to contain within it parts of other states, including Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and Wyoming. And the essence of Mexico is still within its soil, and in its demographics.

A place called California might exist, but not where one imagines it to be. The California Biennial might similarly exist, but not where we expect to find it.

#### Postscript

This text was written in the following cities, although not necessarily in this order: Paris, New York, Los Angeles, and São Paulo. The California Biennial, as an idea, trespassed through these places.

**Opposite:**  
Tony Labat  
*Icarus (One in Hand)*, 1986  
Mixed-media installation  
Two chambers,  
approx. 144 x 144 in. each  
Lent by the artist and Gallery  
Paule Anglim

**Overleaf:**  
Villa Fontana low-income  
developer-built housing,  
East Tijuana, 2008  
Photo courtesy of Rene Peralta

