Delegates at the Asian-African Conference in Bandung, West Java, April 1955.

The art world has become international, a conversation shared or overheard at more and more points in the world system. This extension of international reach has occurred repeatedly, following the flows of commerce and international trade. The highest claims of biennials, triennials, or other recursive exhibition forms is that they de-territorialize the global art scene, allowing artists from the center and the periphery an equal shot at appearing in varied and far-flung locales and before new and diverse audiences. I discuss this claim later on. I also attempt to situate my own project through three moments of personal history. Before I get to the personal, however, I would like to trace some currents of postwar and mostly Euro-American cultural history to set the stage for the discussion of the biennial moment.

Internationalism has long been on the world agenda, for reasons both negative and positive. The fight for political, economic, and cultural hegemony has been an ongoing one since the mid-twentieth century when, facing and contesting the apparent split of the globe into the spheres of influence of two great superpowers, the largely Asian and African Non-Aligned Movement was set in motion by twenty-nine nations, many of them recently freed from colonial rule and representing about one and a half billion people. This movement received its great push at Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955.[1] In the same period, many artists around the world saw themselves as another non-aligned, though as-yet unorganized, force—a counterforce to nationalism. While Western powers supported exhibitions of favored types, such as "advanced" abstraction in the form of Abstract Expressionism, Western corporations were marketing their branded goods around the world, with marketing that included such ecstatic paeans

to the global as Pepsi-Cola's support for the photographic exhibition "The Family of Man," organized by Edward Steichen at New York's Museum of Modern Art (and analyzed long ago by Roland Barthes).[2] This grand exhibition of the work of scores of photojournalists showed heartfelt universal-humanist intentions but was infused with a Western sensibility centered on its quasi-anthropological themes. The postwar art market, for its part, was trying to reap the profits of high-profile European and American production, while artists—admittedly regionalized but not globalized—had their own circuits of interest, sporadically supported by mostly noncommercial galleries and museums.

After the catastrophe of two world wars and a long series of political upheavals, aesthetic doctrines and aestheticism held a renewed appeal for artists. Nineteenth-century European Romanticism had developed the doctrine of art as another way of knowing, offering the promise of a human space apart from political struggles and predatory social practices, while in the US the New England Transcendental poets, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, drew inspiration from Hinduism and Buddhism. In the mid-twentieth century, the philosophical position of withdrawal from worldly engagement drew upon a range of theories, from Hegel and Kant to Adorno, Marcuse, and other philosophers who felt that political commitment constrained art from effectively posing an alternative to the machinery of individual exploitation and mass death. But it is important to note that even the most political of European philosophers—including Sartre, Benjamin, Adorno, Lucien Goldmann, Galvano della Volpe, Gramsci, and even Althusser—appeared, perhaps by default, to have nominated the arts as central mediators and facilitators of human progress. The apparent turn to a cultural view of salvation may be what informed the British physicist, government figure, and novelist C. P. Snow in his lecture at Cambridge University in 1959, "The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution," in which he argued that the split in the West between the sciences and the humanities was preventing an effective approach to solving global problems, not least the growing gap in wealth between rich and poor nations and rich and poor populations, which he thought could be addressed only by scientists activating forward-looking solutions.[3] Snow felt that scientific illiteracy was the more harmful of the two blind spots—at least in Britain, which was far less likely than the US and Germany to inculcate scientific understanding in its students. But he is supposed to have cautioned, "Technology is a queer thing; it brings you great gifts with one hand, and it stabs you in the back with the other."[4] Philosopher Simon Critchley, in his book *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short History*, characterized Snow's Two Cultures thesis as a reiteration of the long-standing philosophical division among English intellectual elites, going back at least as far as John Stuart Mills's division between the Benthamites, or utilitarians, and the Coleridgeans, or those favoring the poetic imagination.

At the start of the 1960s, Snow's thesis seemed a fair-enough account of the worldview of some in the Euro-American orbit. For artists in particular, as I have suggested, the depoliticized aesthetic imagination was seen as the pinnacle of future-think, despite Snow's explicit devaluation of "traditional" culture as "wishing the future did not exist." Fifty years along, however, it is hard to see the world as Snow did, as a separation of the scientific and technical outlook from the so-called human sciences in which the latter, the humanities,

are ascendant and cloud our ability to develop rational solutions to global problems. What we are experiencing instead is a moment of increased dependency on technological invention—both at the pragmatic level of everyday life and as the last remaining indicator of something like progress—and an increased quantification of the measures of life and commerce—all the while attempting to harness the power of the imagination. We seem to be experiencing a repoliticization of art and culture, in some rather broadly divergent circles.

Let us further consider the moment of postwar depoliticization of the upper echelons of the Euro-American art world. We might recognize this embrace of aestheticism, of an ennobling formalism, not as a forward-looking formula for world progress but as a reaction: a response to the aggressively anticommunist "witch hunts" of Anglo-American society that, in the US, went under the name of McCarthyism and that manifested a blunt suspicion of art, artists, and abstraction. While the US government was sponsoring world tours of high-art abstraction in painting and sculpture as the concentrated symbol of universal human freedom, the Western art world's most advanced sectors—the avant-garde, the group under suspicion of political disloyalty by McCarthyites—embraced a sort of withdrawal, a quietism ostensibly drawing upon Eastern religions, especially Zen Buddhism, an influence promulgated by such figures as John Cage and Alan Watts. That art world was still largely bohemian, its ideology focused more on artistic than financial goals and suspicious of worldly success. Despite the stance of disengagement—and mindful of the philosophical support for the aesthetic route to liberation—those artistic goals were often perceived as in solidarity, however nebulously, with progressive social movements, with Enlightenment goals, or with some version of each, an attitude bound to arouse the suspicions of jingoistic patriots. By the 1960s, the movements in question would have included postcolonial political movements as well as those internal to the Western democracies, particularly the cultural movements born late in that decade. The utopianism of early modernism had trained its eye on liberation from tyranny, on the becoming-human of humanity, and this was still important to many artists, despite the empty formalism that threatened to overtake high modernism. Despite the complications of recognized cultural prejudices and misperceptions, with their embedded hierarchies of value, the universalist outlook produced a certain international, or pan-national, perspective. It is not a surprise, then, that artists were attempting to express, and if necessary smuggle, such attitudes into international exhibitions. But the circulation of work beyond the channels capitalized by states and commercial interests, in those down-market subcultural spaces of art I have mentioned—namely, video, and further down the chain, mail art—the *work* circulated, but generally not the artists, since there were few museums or galleries willing to pay for transportation and accommodations, except for distinguished elder figures.

In the early 1970s, although quite a young artist, I was invited to participate in a series of international video exhibitions. One of the notable appeals of video was its ability to create international "networked" flows of information, images, and art, outside of institutional frameworks. Even forty years ago, video—enfolded as it was in clouds of information-systems theory, accompanied by the "wow" factor of advanced image technology, and suffering a seemingly boundless euphoria—saw

itself as embodying a new forward-looking spirit of internationalism that can be summed up under the McLuhanist moniker of the "global village." Even so, video was preceded, but with far less fanfare, by mail art, which had similar boundary-busting aspirations and which included artists who had no high-art ambitions. Mail, after all, is a low-tech form whose networks of transmission were in place by the nineteenth century. I happened also to be included in the mail-art network, since I had mailed out a series of postcard novels in the early 1970s that had found a widely scattered audience. These early invitations, it is important to underline, were requests for my practically weightless, theoretically unlimited, and easily transmissible works, not for my presence.

A second moment of personal history represents a contrary development: in the early 1980s, I was invited to participate, this time in person, in a different, newly developing network. The new formations were constituted by feminist artists and curators in the international feminist movement, which had arisen out of one of the signal social movements of the 1960s. I had already been invited to appear at a number of museum shows and lectures in the US. But this was something else. I remember sitting with a group of women artists when one mentioned a letter of invitation she'd received to a women's show in Germany; several of us had also received such a letter, and phone messages. We asked a well-known feminist critic sitting among us what to do. Laughing, she told us to ignore it. I felt a bit disquieted, but ignore it I did. Not that I was culturally incurious; rather, I had a job to go to and a son to raise, and it seemed somehow inappropriate to be gallivanting around. If nothing else, the prospect of transoceanic travel and the problem

I started as an unwrapper at one of the 200,000 McTower's hamburger stands. I wore a yellow teeny-jumper with blue suspenders and large white rick-rack trim over a white blouse and a perky little yellow paper cap with imitation rick-rack. And an apron. I made $1.25 an hour.

My job was to unwrap the frozen patties in the morning and let them thaw just enough to be pulled apart. When the white crystals had melted and the flecks of pink, beige, and white could be told apart, it was time to separate them. I used to imagine I was peeling stories off a skyscraper. Or sometimes I was peeling the heel layers off stack-heel shoes. Or layers of skin off a dinosaur scab. Sometimes I imagined a country where the money was made of food and I was the person whose job it was to peel the coins apart. It was funny to think about.

Martha Rosler, Postcard #1 from *McTowersMaid*, 1974. Serial postcard novel in fifteen parts.