Like my colleague and compatriot, Alvin Martin, I regret that I must present my talk not in the lingua franca of this meeting, but in my native tongue. I am not unable to speak French, but I trust my French less than I trust our translators' English. En toute façon...

As has been made clear for you, the art scene in America is undergoing a process of unregulated decentralization, a process that has gone on for at least 20 years and which has been determined by social and economic, rather than by political, conditions. I would like briefly to consider certain of these conditions not already discussed, and then I'd like to get down to business and talk about the effect of decentralization in the United States on its art capital, New York.

Unlike most of the countries represented at this conference, the United States is a physically large country. And, unlike other large countries, population in the States is not confined mostly to the perimeters. Although the central portion of the country is less populous than the coasts, "Middle America"— stretching from Pennsylvania to Wyoming, from New Hampshire to Oklahoma— still accounts for a large part of the American population and sociocultural character. Thus, given the expansion of interest in the arts throughout the fabric of American life, we can acknowledge that there is some serious art being done in every part of the nation— indeed, in every state.

Now, in the United States, as you probably know, the individual states have a fair amount of autonomy in governing themselves. If Mr. Reagan has his way, they will have a lot more. But it is interesting to note that the states don't seem to <u>want</u> more power right now— it will cost more than they can afford. Some states cannot afford what they must pay for now. Among the things for which many states now pay is culture. I would guess that a majority of the 50 states now have arts councils responsible for funding individuals and

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institutions in each state. At certain times, local social and economic conditions— and pure luck— create very strong, active arts councils in certain states. At other times the arts councils in these states lose influence, while those in other states grow. A few years ago, for example, the arts council in California was very vigorous, funding many projects and artists and encouraging much community interest and support. A so-called "taxpayers' revolt" in 1978 cut much of the funding for the council; and it has faded in importance. Many of the institutions supported by the California council now thrive on their own, but many others have died or are struggling as a result of severely diminished state-government patronage. On the other hand, even in this time of fiscal austerity, certain state arts councils are now empowered to dispense good amounts of money and exercise leadership roles. The councils in Nevada, Ohio, Alaska, Texas, and Washington State, to name five, are richer and more active than ever. Perhaps they, too, will change if their parent organization, the federal government's National Endowment for the Arts, has its funds cut back. (So far, however, the Endowment has escaped the axe.) But state taxes and the involvement of private corporations <u>also</u> determine the budgets of the state councils, and the councils are free to dispense money around their states as they see fit. Thus we have a discontinuous pattern of funding policies for the arts throughout the United States. Imagine, if you would, an artist's house on the border of two states, one with a powerful arts council, the other with no council at all. Which state do you think the artist says he (or she) lives in?

If the United States is a patchwork of funding policies, I should emphasize that it is a <u>big</u> patchwork. The size of the country introduces another factor that helps break down centralizing tendencies. Even though electronic media have shrunk our world conceptually, it is still a world we must deal with physically in many ways. There is nothing more physical than plastic

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artwork, at least in any traditional medium. When artwork is sent from one place to another, it takes up time, space, effort, care, and money. More and more money. It is becoming prohibitively expensive for museums, galleries, and artists alike to ship works, insure them, exhibit them, re-pack them, and return them. The mails are not cheap, either. Thus, in these days of rising shipping and insurance costs, it is more and more difficult to circulate exhibitions around the States. The chances of an artist who works outside New York to show his or her work in New York (or anywhere he or she cannot bring it him or herself) are lessened significantly, because the artist cannot afford it, or his or her dealer (actual or hoped-for) does not want to assume frightful freight costs. There is only one advantage: no duty is charged between states. (Yet!) Finally, the artist thinks, "Well, if my work cannot travel far, I might as well make the best of it." Making the best of it means showing art in regions more accessible to where the artist lives. This helps build the local art scenes in those nearby areas— as well, of course, as in the artist's own home town.

Why doesn't the artist just move to New York? After all, if the artist's "local scene" is New York, he or she exhibits in a national, even international context without having to strain his or her finances. First of all, it strains one's finances to live in New York, whether or not one is an artist, but especially if one is. The cost of adequate working and living space in Manhattan is tremendous, and if one lives and works in one of the "outer boroughs" one might as well be living and working in Mississippi; the geographic insularity of NewYork dealers, curators, and critics keeps Manhattan very much an island. This is beginning to change— but as it does, lofts in Brooklyn are becoming more expensive, and we have the same problem.

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Second of all, living and working in New York means being involved, almost against one's will, in a constant competition with thousands upon thousands of other artists. I notice more and more that it is harder to talk with a New York artist about aesthetics than it is about business— especially about that artist's career. It is as if the professional artists who flock to New York— and they still do— are more interested in being professionals than in being artists.

More and more, artists who visit New York(with the idea of perhaps moving there)notice this often oppressive careerism. Those visitors not already afflicted with their own careerist preoccupations are appalled; when they consider the financial and spiritual advantages in staying where they already live, the idea of relocating to New York— where they would be only small drops in a huge pond— loses its glamour.

In fact, moving to New York has been losing its value, too. Rather like Paris in the 1930s, New York has been stagnating under its own parochialism. The insularity that set in among its art-world people during the triumphant years of Abstract Expressionism has only grown worse since, as that triumph in art has translated itself into predominance in the art market. Inarguably, New York is still the primary art market for the world. But years of New York art chauvinism, which has translated far too often into art-market chauvinism, has begun to erode even New York's international pre-eminence in this realm.

It is New York's diminishing role as the cultural focus specifically for the United States that I wish to address, however. New York is still the crossroads for American art, the place to which everyone brings his or her art and ideas in order to diffuse them with maximum efficiency (whatever the cost of shipping). But, partly because of those costs, artists desire more and more to diffuse ideas and work [redacted] (without going through) New York— and are more and more able to do so.

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Just as employment for artists is best provided outside New York, as Alvin Martin explained, the growth of regional art markets gives artists outside New York the reason, and the ability, to stay outside. The anchoring of art activity in regional centers has led to the "third step" in creating regional art capitals after the presence of artists and places to show them: discourse. In the last few years there has been a dramatic rise in serious art-critical activity in regional American art centers. Sometimes this has been supported, even instigated, by local newspapers or magazines; but more often it results [redacted] from the same tendency among writers as among artists. They are simply less motivated to move to New York than they used to be. Teaching jobs, state grants, and even publishing opportunities exist outside New York as they never used to.

Of course, publishing opportunities are still greater in New York than out, but even this is beginning to change. The emergence of serious (and even economically viable) art publications outside New York has resulted from writers' desire to stay out, and from the local art communities' desire to keep them. These publications (such as LAICA Journal and Images & Issues in Los Angeles or Art Com in San Francisco) focus on their home regions, often ideologically as well as practically. A few even cover several regions outside New York at once, thus providing significant information to one region about activity in another. (I am thinking of journals like Artweek, based near San Francisco, and the New Art Examiner, with bureaux in Chicago and Washington, D.C.) Thus the former information monopoly maintained by the New York art magazines, with their distinctly New York bias, is circumvented. Cross-pollination among regions, instituted by academic exchanges, continues on the level of aesthetic discourse itself. Specialized magazines and newsletters (e.g. Umbrella in Los Angeles) also contribute to the attention that is paid regional art.

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I must admit that such regional art magazines do go out of business as quickly as they appear. They never offer that much commercial viability, and can only rarely attract the skilled editors and managers needed to keep them going. This situation could change, too, however— at least if the economic recession comes to an end.

How does all this regional independence and self-sufficiency affect l'ancien régime of New York? Well, to talk to many New York dealers, artists, critics, editors, and curators, it means the death of serious art. It means the triumph of provinciality. It means that those dealers, artists, critics, editors, and curators have to leave the island of Manhattan to keep track of current developments, and neither the expense nor the effort required to leave the island has much appeal. Why, it's bad enough that New York art people must now pay attention to new developments in Europe! At least in Europe they can find something to eat. But God forbid they should have to travel to St. Louis or Seattle! Actually, most American cities now have good restaurants of their own— but there is no convincing those parochial New Yorkers of this.

More and more art people in New York, however, are responsive to non-New York art. Some of them are forced to be: the out-of-town clients of New York dealers are now insisting that those dealers return the attention and look at out-of-town artists (at least those favored by the clients). But, even more, art people in New York— especially younger ones— are more curious, and better informed, about non-New York art than they used to be. Many of them, after all, were raised and educated outside New York, and the younger artists, writers, curators, and dealers in particular came to maturity at the same time as the regional centers which produced them. They are no longer embarrassed by their "provincial origins," but believe they have something to contribute to the international art scene in New York as well as something to get out of that scene.

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I myself was born in New York, went to school there, and have never lived anywhere else. I have plenty of emotional, as well as professional, reason to defend New York from the barbaric hordes and to maintain its pre-eminence in American, and world, art. But, to be honest, I would rather live in a city which is less important but more interesting. New York is no longer the source for all important ideas in American art— and certainly not in world art— and all it can hope to be is the magnet for those ideas, the place to which artists are most eager to bring their concepts and achievements. Unfortunately, as I noted before, the economics of transportation make this difficult. So does the fact that New York, as many galleries as it has, is limited in the space it can provide to show art, exotic or native. Therefore I feel it my duty— and certainly my interest— to travel in America— and the world— as much as possible, to keep myself informed of developments outside New York. Perhaps I can be instrumental in bringing these developments to the attention of New York, or perhaps not. But at least someone in New York will know that Kansas City and Philadelphia have workable, even exciting art scenes. And, if I cannot travel (for after all, travelling is an increasingly unbearable expense), I still feel obligated to inform myself of art outside New York through the art publications generated by our regional art centers.

I had the singular good fortune a couple of years ago to be invited by the Guggenheim Museum to assemble a carefully selected show of art around the United States. I spent almost a year travelling to as many regional centers as I could, in search of lesser-known but mature and accomplished talent. I had given myself a ground rule that not more than half the artists in the exhibit be New York artists. I did not need the rule: two-thirds of the 19 artists I

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chose came from places like Chicago, San Diego, Houston, Fort Worth, New Orleans, Minneapolis, Seattle, Boulder Colorado, and Washington D.C. (and, in a second choice of 19 artists, centers like Santa Barbara, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Portland Oregon similarly comprised a majority.) Up until then, as a result of concentrated visits to California and occasional visits to a few other places, I suspected that art was occurring in an important way, and being considered seriously as a local matter, all over the country. The year I spent travelling for the Guggenheim Museum confirmed my suspicions more clearly than I had even expected it would. I was delighted. The idea of living in New York became more exciting than ever.

There is an aphorism attributed apocryphally to Harold Rosenberg, the great critic of postwar art who helped focus Abstract Expressionism and bring it to worldwide attention. "In other places," Rosenberg is supposed to have said, "people ask themselves, 'Is art possible here?' In New York they ask themselves, 'Is art possible?'" I am pleased to report that the existential question, "Is art possible?"— that feeling of doubt which provokes creativity— is now being asked all over the United States, a result of widespread creative ferment. The paranoid doubt of the provincial, "Is art possible here?" is fast becoming an academic question.

Now all we have to do is answer the other question— and I hope we never do. Thank you.

— Peter Frank
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