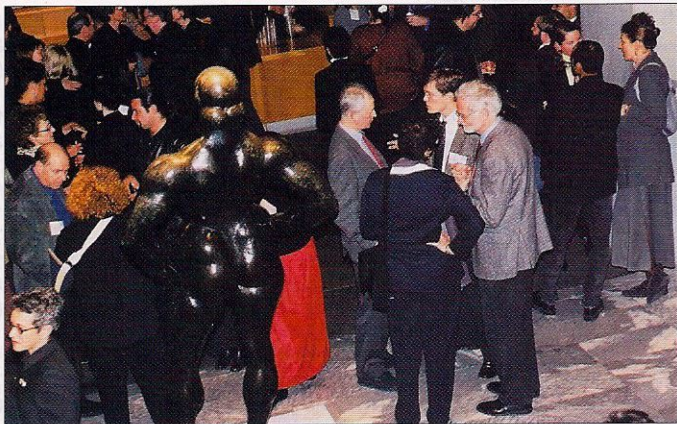


The Unconventional Convention

The College Art Association's annual conference features networking, job seeking, and an intellectual fashion show

BY GAIL GREGG



Mingling at MoMA: Among the events provided for this year's CAA conventioners was a reception at the Museum of Modern Art.

Two groups of conventioners shared the New York Hilton's glitzy escalators for several days in late February, but even a casual observer would have known they weren't destined for the same meetings. To the left marched a phalanx of navy-suited businessmen swinging their briefcases toward Donaldson, Lufkin and Jenrette's energy conference; to the right ambled a black-clad swarm of artists, art historians, art educators, art writers, art curators, and art students who had exchanged their studios and classrooms for the College Art Association's (CAA) annual conference.

Clutching their ubiquitous slide carousels, some 5,000 art professionals—or professional hopefuls—navigated the Hilton's block-long conference floors in search of old friends, long-distance colleagues, or new jobs. The dawn-to-dusk schedule of meetings, seminars, interviews, and cocktail parties filled the vast convention center with the anxious air of freshman orientation at a large university. For people who have spent most of their adult lives quietly dipping brushes into paint—or lecturing about people who quietly dip brushes into paint—there was an awesome amount of flesh-pressing and earnest networking.

And then there were the "sessions," where art historians showed off the scholarship that had kept them busy since the last CAA conference. "Arcane" is too general an adjective for the subjects that get "shared" with CAA audiences: everything from the mismatched piers of

Nôtre-Dame Cathedral to noninvasive dissections of the mind to shopping in Italy, 1350–1550, is expounded upon—and argued over—during this intellectual fashion show. Practicing artists could be heard voicing a certain impatience with the vocabulary of contemporary art history, with its "ordering systems," "non-oscillating experientialists," "neurobiological praxes," "commodification," and "preferencing." And it was not uncommon to see a conventioneer succumb to the narcoleptic tug of the dark and overheated lecture rooms.

The atmosphere was especially tense in the huge room where university recruiters manned banks of tables and hundreds of applicants made pitches for full-time academic positions. One recruiter, from a college in rural Wisconsin, punched a map to demonstrate that her school really was in the middle of nowhere; previous hires had apparently been unprepared for the reality of one-stoplight living. At other stations along the white-skirted tables, it was a recruiter's game. Foot-high stacks of manila envelopes and presentation binders indicated the hot schools. Interviews for the coveted jobs were, in fact, assigned long before the convention began, to applicants who had survived a first cut.

Just down the hall was another hot conference ticket: a chance for new graduates to meet with a volunteer "career development" counselor who would help them design winning applications. Nash Hyon, a Connecticut painter and recent MFA, took notes while counselor Alberto Rey of SUNY Fredonia marked up her materials and sent her off with a strategy. "Always have those slides out," he reminded her.

Next door, curators and critics were volunteering for a similar exercise, with young studio artists looking for a way into the gallery system. Andrea Inselmann, a curator from the Kohler Arts Center near Milwaukee, patiently helped a nervous Patrick Shaw feed his slides into the viewer. A May graduate of the Newark Museum School, he looked a little puzzled by her query "What are you hoping your audience will get out of this?" But by the end of the session his nervousness had given way to an obvious pleasure in gazing at the glowing images of his own work.

Perhaps it is this kind of encounter that prompts artists and art historians to break from their routines once a year to embrace the peculiar American custom of conventioning. They tolerate the stale air and anxious bustle, even the fluorescent garishness of the Hilton, to recommit themselves publicly, in the very best company, to this crazy private thing they love: art. ■

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