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SCENE & HERD

RECENT ARCHIVE

- Kyle Bentley at a Guy de Cointet performance and Guild & Greyshkul's closing
- Michael Wilson at a debate on art-market ethics
- Lisa DeSimone on an evening of openings in Milan
- Michael Wilson on Tiravanija ping-pong at Nyehaus
- Catherine Taft around Art LA
- Don Kulick at a symposium for "Whatever Happened to Sex in Scandinavia?"



NEWS PICKS FILM

Newest Headlines

- Film-Makers' Cooperative Faces Eviction
- Manifesta 8 to Take Place in the Region of Murcia, Spain
- Christian Marclay Receives Larry Aldrich Award
- New Director for Smithsonian Museum of African Art; Rose Art Museum Chair Speaks Out; One Washington Museum Finds Unusual Source of Income
- Damien Hirst Opens Second Shop; Stuckists Launch Online Store, Satirize Hirst
- Mark Wallinger Chosen for Ebbsfleet Public-Art Commission
- Shepard Fairey's Countersuit; Phaidon Press Acquires *Cahiers du Cinéma*
- Koolhaas Building in CCTV Complex Engulfed

Cram Session

BOSTON 03.08.06



Left: MIT List Visual Arts Center curator Bill Arning and critic Irving Sandler. Right: Artist Coco Fusco with baby.

At the 94th annual CAA conference, outgoing executive director Susan Ball, bidding her constituents farewell after twenty years at the helm, injected a bit of suspense into a largely lackluster convocation with a well-timed "odds are my successor is in the house tonight." A nice device, but was I alone in sensing a collective shrinking into the seats? What crowd could be tougher to please? A third of the CAA's fourteen thousand members—MFA-candidate job-seekers, venerable academics, a star curator or two—had gathered at Boston's Hynes Convention Center for four days of networking, discount book-buying, and over 180 sessions on topics from ancient Mesoamerica to "Bio-Tech and Bots." In short, it was an art-loving binge-thinker's paradise.

Why then, were "dull as dishwater" and "stale" among the mordant first takes on this year's session offerings? One veteran reminisced about the '70s and '80s, when "everyone knew what the hot topic was and a thousand people would show up for that panel." In his keynote address, *Nation* critic Arthur Danto considered the respective roles of the artists' statements and works themselves in his Apex Art exhibition "The Art of 9/11." "The objects are indispensable," he concluded, "but the words are prosthetic." This dialectic echoed through the chilly halls of what painter and writer Mira Schor dubbed the Hynes's "Mussolini architecture." How could words and slides alone cut it for those of us drunk on the object glut of Chelsea, art fairs, biennials, and the studio? A not unrelated lament, from Nick Mirzoeff, director of the visual culture program at NYU: "There are so few fucking parties at this conference!"



Left: Curator Okwui Enwezor. Right: MIT Visual Arts Program director Ute Meta Bauer and artist Judith Barry.

But of course there were parties, and some bracing sessions. By Friday one could detect an attitude shift, as peevishness gave way to relayed highlights from the dais. Among them for me was "Implementing Diversity in Art-History Pedagogy," chaired by Coco Fusco. Panelist Richard Meyer said that despite students having stormed out of his USC course on "Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Contemporary Art," he still shows Linda Benglis's 1974 *Artforum* ad and Robert Mapplethorpe's images of fisting (which the effervescent Meyer helpfully defined). He just takes precautions, like showing not the fisting images themselves, but a portrait of Mapplethorpe at his 1978 "Censored" opening, in which those images appear, quite legibly, on the wall beside him. Susan Cahan, a former Norton Collection curator turned professor, chronicled her search for the least biased contemporary-art survey text. Alas, in those she considered—by Brandon Taylor, Edward Lucie-Smith, Tom Crow, Lisa Phillips, and the quartet behind *Art Since 1900*—she found outrageous examples of discrimination. Melanie Herzog and Paul Prindle, a professor-student team, described their thoughtful approach to teaching a class on art,



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gender, and sexuality to a "shock-prone student body" at a small Catholic school in Wisconsin.

At Saturday's "Curators as Critics" session, introduced by Irving Sandler and chaired by independent scholar Debra Bricker Balken, the "crisis in criticism" seemed to be an article of faith. Bill Arning, curator at the MIT List Center, recounted his tutelage under the "visionary" former *Village Voice* arts editor Vince Aletti and introduced the contemporary curator/critic's thorn in the side: conflict of interest around living artists. Harry Cooper, curator of modern art at the Fogg, analyzed the hybrid role and ended with "a plea for critical criticism." Helen Molesworth, chief curator at the Wexner Center, confessed she'd be a "dark cloud" over the proceedings, but ended with signs of hope: diversified practices like those of artists collective LTTR, a "nascent return" of artist-writers like Andrea Fraser, and new-model galleries like Triple Candie ("it's a time of small gestures"). Bennett Simpson, associate curator at Boston's ICA, concluded that "transparency and disinterestedness do not exist."



Left: Sculpture Center curator Anthony Huberman and artist Mike Smith. Right: ZRC SAZU's Marina Grzinic and architect Kyong Park.

As it turned out, there was a hot panel this year, namely "Art and Politics in Africa: Africans and the Avant Garde." There weren't quite a thousand people there, but it was standing room only, a situation artist, writer, and curator Olu Oguibe clearly relished as he recalled an audience of four at his CAA session a decade ago and declared a "unique moment in contemporary African art studies." The weightiness and promise of the papers (topics included the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar), incisive discussant critiques, charming marshaling style of chair Nnamdi Elleh, and engaging audience questions (including one from a scholar of Japanese art seeking parallels of cross-cultural exchange), lent this session real urgency. Art historian James Meyer summed it up as "the liveliest, freshest session at this year's CAA."

Ah yes, the parties. On Wednesday there was a champagne reception for CAA awardees of distinction in the Newbury Street townhouse surrounds of Vose Galleries, est. 1841. Among awardees present were Okwui Enwezor and Gregg Bordowitz, who shared this year's Frank Jewett Mather Award for Art Criticism. On Thursday night, Marquard Smith, editor-in-chief of the London-based *Journal of Visual Culture*, hosted an intimate party at the Charlesmark Hotel, where cold beer and good lighting soothed the corporeal agitation of ten hours of conferencing. The weekend's "giant art party," as it billed itself, was at MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies. On Friday night, a few hundred conference escapees crammed into its main space, where videos by early CAVS fellows (Pat Hearn, Stan Van Der Beek) were projected, and into the Christmas-light-lit barroom, where current fellow Mike Smith's rough-cut video about a "middle-age self-learner" who never quite makes it to MIT screened. Introductions were made between the likes of a Media Lab researcher bringing ultra-cheap information networks to a sub-Saharan African country and a Harvard fellow focusing on the persistence of the fascist aesthetic. One partygoer observed that it felt "just like New York." Maybe, but more to the point, it was distinctly fun, and distinctly young, two reads one wouldn't readily apply to the CAA conference itself. The former isn't so imperative: CAA's notorious serious-mindedness might be a necessary counterbalance in the current art-market culture. But a younger membership would seem to be essential, for both the present and future of CAA. That would take a cheaper ticket. At \$145 (for early-taker, paid members) to \$355 (for on-site, nonmembers), the cost of admission is just plain exclusionary. N.B., successor in the house.



Left: Writer and director of NYU's Visual Culture program Nicholas Mirzoeff with Routledge's Natalie Foster. Right: Artists Mira Schor and Maureen Connor.

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Left: Visual AIDS' Amy Sadao, artist Jeanine Oleson, and RISD's Julia Bryan-Wilson. Right: Fogg curator Harry Cooper and writer and ICA Boston curator Bennett Simpson.



Left: Art historian and professor James Meyer, artist Marcia Kure, and Arinze Okeke-Agulu. Right: Writer Debra Bricker Balken and Wexner Center chief curator Helen Molesworth.



Left: MIT art history professor Caroline Jones and Bill Arning. Right: Artist and critic Charles Giuliano.

— Jennifer Liese

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