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30 Years of SECAC: Reflections and Musings

There have now been seventy SECAC meetings, and it is sobering to think that I have participated in thirty of them. Since 1984 I've attended every meeting but two. The first SECAC meeting I attended was in Richmond in 1984. I gave a paper in the FATE session, "Art History as a Foundation for Invention." At that meeting, the schedule was divided between morning sessions and afternoon sessions, with four to six sessions going on at the same time, and five or six papers in each. In looking at the program on our website, I see that Faith Ringgold was a panelist in a session entitled "The Women's Art Movement / The Black Art Movement." There also was a session "Dialogue on Graphic Design." Among the names of persons giving papers, the ones I recognize of those who still attend SECAC are Betsy Fahlman, Robert Craig, and Norman Land. Interestingly, too, that paper I gave eventually turned into a published article.

Probably many of us have had similar experiences when attending SECAC or a similar organization's annual meeting for the first time. You don't know many people, don't yet know the customs and traditions, and are more likely to focus on the session you are in. But it's things like the taxi rides, or who you sit by on a bus, or who you end up near at a gallery reception that help you see the larger organization. In my diary (which has been useful for retrieving some details about past meetings), I noted meeting Rob Craig, for we shared a taxi. I got to know some other people at lunches and receptions that year, but none seem to have become regulars at later SECAC meetings. I noted how wonderful was a reception at the Best Products corporate headquarters, where I enjoyed visiting with Virginia Rembert, then at Alabama, and Carolyn Kolb, of New Orleans.

In 1986, at the University of Alabama, I gave a paper on the architectural history of some Little Rock churches in a session organized by Philippe Oszuscik of the University of South Alabama, whom I had known in graduate school. Also in that session was Pam Simpson, such a key figure in SECAC of the 1980s and '90s. That was also the year of my first meeting among SECAC's Board of Directors, for I had been elected as the Arkansas representative when Lloyd Benjamin had completed two terms. All I wrote about the board meeting in my diary was that I had to rush to get there by 6:00 p.m. when it started (I had driven from Little Rock), and that it went till 10:30 p.m. We start earlier now, but I fear we still end up with long board meetings. I suspect if we checked the minutes of that meeting it was probably one of many where John Schnorrenberg argued for conservative budgets, always concerned that we would have to cancel some annual meeting at the last minute because of a storm or hurricane.

These days we must have our meetings in big hotels with lots of meeting rooms. In that year we were in Tuscaloosa, all staying at the Shoney's Inn, with our sessions held in campus rooms. The first evening Virginia Rembert had organized a tour of Jack Warner's home, of the Gulf State Paper headquarters of which he was chairman, and a dinner hosted by him at a yacht club. Friday was Halloween, and there was a dinner at an old train station. After the SECAC members meeting on Saturday morning, I shifted to SESAH, which was also in town, but the arrangement then was that their entire meeting was on a Saturday.

In 1987 I drove with some colleagues to Knoxville, where we stayed at a Holiday Inn and most of the sessions were convened in the hotel. Still the arrangement was one three-hour morning session and one three-hour afternoon session, with six or seven presenters in each—and with four to six sessions going on at the same time. One of the papers I enjoyed was given by Larry Ligo, on Manet. For about five years he gave papers on different aspects of Manet at the annual

meetings. It was at this meeting that I first got to know Beauvais Lyons, who had a session “The Conference Paper as Art Form.” My artist friend Brad Cushman and I put together a presentation for this session based on mislabeled slide identifications from survey tests, and clever doctoring of images from survey texts (one example was “The Absent Drinker”). And I noted on the program that Bill Levin chaired the general art history session.

In 1988 we went to Winter Park, Florida, stayed at the Langford Hotel, and were hosted by Rollins College, where Bob Lemon, a long-time member of SECAC who also served as president, taught. The hotel has since been torn down. I have two distinct memories of this hotel. One is that there were slow moving fans in the sleeping rooms and all the public areas. Second is that one session room was the tiny Treetops Room, where all the curtains really couldn't keep all the light away from the screens for the slides. One of the things I noted about the board meeting was the difficulty we were experiencing, with no resolution, on how to handle a joint meeting with SESA.

This meeting was the last for which the elected secretary-treasurer was Joan Gregory of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She had served in this position for a long time, continually re-elected. She handled things like membership, finances, and conference registration. She ran a tight ship. During these years a typical Saturday schedule consisted of the membership meeting with a continental breakfast, followed by one set of sessions. Then there were planned activities for Saturday afternoon, since the rules of the airlines at this time meant that staying over on a Saturday night ensured a much cheaper ticket. That year, 1988, I have a lovely memory of going to Epcot Center with Virginia Rembert, Martha Caldwell, Peggy Poulson, and Peggy McDowell. It was great fun and I got to know those ladies in an informal way. Virginia and I were already acquainted from the Tuscaloosa meeting, and from the fact that I got my position at UALR following her departure. Martha Caldwell was the SECAC president then, the first person to hold the office three years in a row, as described in the constitution we still use. Before her, generally the person who was director of the annual meeting was also the president, for one year. Peggy Poulson taught at Appalachian State, and until her retirement was a regular at our meetings. Peggy McDowell later was president, hosted a wonderful meeting in New Orleans, and was active in SECAC until her retirement.

Nineteen eighty-nine was a big year for me and SECAC because we hosted the meeting in Little Rock, and it was the first of two in which I served as the conference director. Wednesday was the board meeting, and my diary notes “much verbiage” from two individuals that I will not name. I worried about things like difficulties with buses, moving sessions from one hotel to another, and people that didn't show up.

SECAC met in Memphis in 1991, a short drive for me. By this point I was beginning my tenure as editor of the *SECAC Review*, so I addressed the board meeting in this capacity. One of the things we discussed at some length was whether or not to have advertising in the journal. We discussed it a lot, and ended up having some modest advertising from some publishers, but it was not something we continued for long. I gave a paper at that meeting and also did something that I did on subsequent occasions too: I had breakfast with Pam Simpson and Betsy Fahlman. All of us were “morning people,” and this is a special memory I have from a number of meetings. I wish I had stayed for the Saturday-evening party at Graceland, but I returned to Little Rock that afternoon. That party has been described elsewhere by Tina Updike as one of the more memorable SECAC social events.

I was able again in 1992 to drive to the meeting, held in Birmingham and organized by John Schnorrenberg. Somehow we managed to have a joint meeting with the Mid-America Arts Alliance; this is something that is good in that it brings a lot of people together, but always complicated in terms of determining who pays for what, and also complicated in finding enough meeting space. The format was a little different: the boards of both groups met separately on Thursday morning, and sessions started after lunch and continued through Saturday afternoon. SECAC was now having two-hour-long sessions for the most part. In 1992, we were still in the period of the Jesse Helms/Robert Mapplethorpe/National Endowment for the Arts controversies, so there was an interesting session about censorship of photographic images. The final party was at the Sloss Furnaces and was a great social occasion. When SECAC meets in Birmingham in 2018, there will likely be three to four times the number of participants as in 1992.

We met in Durham in 1993. That was another year we started Thursday with a board meeting—8:30 till 1:30 with lunch in the middle. The afternoon was given over to sessions, and there was a trip to Chapel Hill for a reception in the evening. Friday night we visited the North Carolina Museum in Raleigh, and Saturday's business meeting was, in my notes, "too long." Saturday included a separate graduate-student session, something we did for a period of years before deciding it was more appropriate to have graduate students submit their work to regular sessions.

Nineteen ninety-four was my first SECAC meeting in New Orleans, though the organization had met there before. We all stayed at the Monteleone Hotel and had sessions in the meeting rooms. I noted that at that year's board meeting, there seemed to be a lot of tension about the state of plans for the following year's meeting. The board meeting that year was split, the first part on Wednesday night, the second from 8:15 to 10:15 on Thursday morning. In my diary I noted interesting visits to a library designed by Henry Hobson Richardson and a contemporary art museum, and pleasant conversations with a number of people that I counted among my SECAC friends. On Friday we had sessions and an evening event at the New Orleans Museum that included a lecture by James Ackermann. Saturday started with the members meeting; my notes read, "Usual sparse attendance." The afternoon was spent informally touring the city, and we had a Halloween party (it was October 29) in the evening at the local wax museum, which is no more. That was a memorable party, everyone with masks and beads and some costumes. Sunday morning there was a special visit for those still in town to a warehouse where Mardi Gras floats were made.

In 1995 we ventured outside of our tightly defined "Southeastern" area to Georgetown University in Washington D. C., something that will occur again in 2015 in Pittsburgh. Our Wednesday board meeting was set for 8:00 to 10:00 p.m., with sessions starting on Thursday morning. During this period, I was still editing the *SECAC Review*, so typically I would hold a "meet the editor" function during one day's lunch hour to answer questions about the journal. Among the activities that Friday that I made notes about were a session on British art and my UALR colleague Michael Warrick making comments about receiving the Artist's Fellowship. Saturday included a long members meeting followed by trips to the National Gallery to see exhibitions of works by Copley and Homer.

The remodeled Francis Marion Hotel in Charleston, SC, was our meeting place for 1996. I had been there with my parents when much younger, and it was fun to see it after some work. My notes indicate the usual schedule of board meeting, sessions, lunches and dinners with old friends, and giving a paper that people seemed to like without inducing much discussion. There

was a lecture that evening, and perhaps enough time has passed to tell my memory of it. In the balcony of a big auditorium I was sitting with another long-time SECAC member; we both felt that we needed to be supportive of the meeting planners and their efforts by attending this lecture. But when the speaker walked to the edge of the stage and said, "Tonight I've decided not to use any slides or notes.... Been there, done that.... I'm just going to talk," my colleague and I looked at each other and decided that instant that a quick exit through a door at the side of the balcony was in order. Probably, if we are honest, everyone in this room has done that once, but we can also say we've heard some good and rewarding lectures and talks, too. Giving a keynote to a group such as SECAC is a difficult assignment: we're of course all interested in the visual arts, but beyond that we are a very diverse group in so many ways. The Charleston meeting included a walking tour on Saturday.

It was back to Richmond in 1997, but now instead of the Holiday Inn it was the wonderful Jefferson Hotel. We've had meetings in some nice places over the years, but I think the Jefferson has to be one of the nicest, and from our 2010 return visit, I think our administrator Rachel Frew would agree that their management was one of the best to work with. We met with Mid-America Arts Alliance, and the program numbered each session, totaling seventy-nine. My notes mention old friends with whom I shared a taxi, ate dinner, or, in one case, went to a place selling grilled donuts. We had an outing at the Virginia Museum and an evening party at the Tredegar Ironworks with music by the Ululating Mummies.

We were in Florida in 1998, in Miami, on the east coast. At that's year's board meeting I made my final report as editor of the *SECAC Review* (though I did guest-edit one issue some years later). Some of the meeting I spent counseling my successor as editor, Roy Sonnema. And it was the usual mix of sessions, lunches, and visits with old friends. I led a session that year on "assessment," something that came to dominate academic discussions in those years. Saturday afternoon featured a bus tour of Coral Gables and the final party that evening at pool-side.

Norfolk, Virginia, was our site for 1999, and in some ways this represents what can be so interesting about choices for meetings. Norfolk is one of those mid-sized places that might not be visited, but this meeting had nice amenities, and the hosts were able to give us a good sense of the city and locale. The meeting featured interesting sessions of all types, and we visited the Chrysler Museum, a restored eighteenth-century house, and some of us traveled to the town of Portsmouth as well to see its architecture.

In 2000 we went to Louisville. One of the things I noted was the first night going out with my UALR colleague Jane Brown and some of her friends to a restaurant where the waitress dropped all our food. I enjoyed a session on British art. One of the keynote speakers was the author of a recent book on J. P. Morgan. This was one of those lectures I remember very favorably: while it was a little unusual to have a speaker who was not an artist, critic, or art historian, it was fascinating to listen to a lecture on patronage and collecting. Visits included the Speed Museum and a hotel basement room decorated with Rookwood Pottery panels.

This will conclude my look backward, since meetings from 2000 to the present are not such ancient history. Now it is time to look forward and consider the organization's future.

We've grown quite a bit, and while that is mostly good, there are negative aspects to it as well. First consider the positive aspects. We are very close to properly paying our administrator for full-time work. When I started at SECAC, there was no administrator, and then for many years it was a part-time job. Our two most recent administrators' tenures have covered more than two decades. Anne Thomas was a wonderful administrator, fiercely loyal to SECAC, and able to keep

things organized. Equally dedicated has been Rachel Frew, who has managed to guide us through dealing with new technologies as well as substantial growth in membership and services. With more people and more funds for awards and prizes, we also now need to hire an accountant, and there are times when we need professional legal and financial advice. But the result is that more people can participate.

What are some of the negative aspects of this growth? Most dangerous in my mind is that we will lose the friendly quality that people have always noted about SECAC. It hasn't happened yet, but I think the organization needs to be very intentional about welcoming new members and keeping them interested in coming, and in providing leadership roles.

We now can't meet just anywhere. With our size, we can't stay at the local motel and use meeting rooms on a campus. We can't stay at charming small hotels like the one in Winter Park, Florida. Fortunately there are plenty of interesting places we can meet, but we now must have at least one fairly large hotel involved, and one secondary hotel for overflow attendance.

It seems to me that we may have "maxed out" with size. If we increase the size of annual meetings, one of the following will have to happen. We will need to be more competitive about accepting papers and presentations. Basically, more people will have to be turned down, which will mean they likely will not come to the meeting and not see SECAC as an organization to which they can be loyal year after year. More precisely, they will not maintain membership year after year. Or we will have to add a day to our meetings, but this likely will mean even more people than now will come for only part of the meeting, again with negative consequences to that prized sense of belonging and loyalty. Or we will have to meet in even bigger places and have more than ten sessions going on simultaneously. It is a hard balancing act, and future leaders will have to figure out how to deal with all these potentially disruptive factors.

One of the most positive aspects of the last thirty years has been the increase in participation and active membership from persons who do not live in the twelve Southeastern states. At first these were mostly people who started out in the area and then moved to another job in another region. We've recognized this diversity by adding two at-large seats to the Board of Directors, specifically defined as being for people who do not reside in the Southeast region. There really aren't any other organizations like SECAC in the nation. There is the Mid-America Arts Alliance, which is heavily weighted to studio art and does not meet every year. There is the Midwest Art History Society, limited to art historians. So it was been great to have non-Southerners become key members of SECAC. Some have argued that we need a name change and perhaps even a governance change to have a truly national appearance. But I think we do not want to become something that will be perceived as a pale alternative to CAA. Future leaders will have to wrestle with this question. I like the idea of maintaining the roots of the organization in the Southeast, but at the same time welcoming members from all over the United States—not only as meeting participants, but as part of the leadership of the organization. Our friends at Southern Graphics Council changed their name to SGC International as a way of keeping their roots in the smaller regional organization of the past while recognizing their wider current membership. Similarly, our solution may be legally to rename our organization "SECAC."

With our meeting next year in Pittsburgh, we also see the organization moving away from the premise that every meeting must be in the Southeast and must have a host institution. I think meetings in the Southeast hosted by a local institution will continue to be the norm, but there will be times when we veer from that model.

SECAC has always had fairly low dues when compared to similar organizations, and has had registration fees for meetings that were calculated to meet expenses and provide for only a small profit to build organizational reserves. This has worked well and likely will continue. However, as noted earlier, an increasing concern is the number of people who come for only one day of the conference, giving their paper and then going home, which does not work in favor of long and deep support for the organization. Yet it is understandable, since there are many adjunct and part-time faculty who are given by their institutions neither time nor funding for conference participation. SECAC will not be able to stop the trend toward reliance on so many part-time faculty, and unfortunately that trend likely will continue to affect conference attendance and the general well-being of the organization.

Right now we have a strong web presence, but we could do more with it and with social media. Discussions are underway about setting up a system of on-line exhibition reviews. It seems that it won't be too long in the future that our journal will have some sort of on-line presence, and perhaps at some point it will exist only in an electronic format. That can increase our readership and offer more opportunities for scholarship, but these moves need to be done in a way that maintains the quality we have come to expect of the *SECAC Review*.

SECAC has never had any focus on development and securing major contributions. Thanks to the generosity of a few, we have funded some travel grants for students and a prize for art historians. Each year twenty to thirty members make contributions, usually in the range of \$10 to \$200, and some members have included bequests in their wills and estate-planning documents. We can do more to encourage members to remember SECAC as a suitable organization for gifts and bequests.

I am very grateful for the opportunities and experiences I have had through SECAC, and for the colleagues and friends over the years. Starting with 2015, I'll be attending the next three meetings and the Board of Directors meetings within them, as the past president. I'm looking forward to that role and seeing what younger colleagues want to do with some of the issues I have mentioned, and no doubt with some issues that we can't predict right now. Things will change, but I hope the core will remain much like what I experienced at those meetings of the late 1980s and early 1990s: interesting sessions; amicable people; an annual time to share stories, good and bad, about the academic life; and the feeling that whatever concerns you have at your own institution, others have them, too, along with the knowledge that sometimes within SECAC you can find helpful solutions or alternatives. Finally, beyond all of these professional and academic benefits, there are those memories of friendly taxi and bus rides, gallery visits, and even places like Epcot Center and a wax museum.