Conference Report:
Reflections on Virtual Conference Formats

Conference Information:

Virtual Southern Aesthetics Workshop II (SAW II). September 17-18, 2020. Organizing Committee: John Gibson (University of Louisville), Madeline Martin-Seaver (Auburn University), Aaron Meskin (University of Georgia), Jonathan Neufeld (The College of Charleston), James Shelley (Auburn University), and Elizabeth Scarbrough (Florida International University)

This is not going to be a standard conference report. Given the way 2020 has gone, which I'm not going to catalog here, that shouldn't be a surprise. Instead, this is going to be a conference report that highlights some of the advantages and disadvantages of having a conference be entirely virtual, with minimal discussion of the work presented at the conference.

On September 17-18, the Southern Division of the American Society for Aesthetics held their second aesthetics workshop (SAW II.) The workshop was originally scheduled to be in person but was shifted to a virtual format in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The workshop was in a read-ahead format, with papers provided in advance and no registration fee. During the conference, pre-designated commentors provided 10 minutes of comments on the papers, followed by a 5-minute reply by the author. The remaining half hour of the session was dedicated to questions and answers.

One of the main advantages of this conference format is that it is only due to the conference being virtual that I was able to attend it at all. Despite a busy schedule dealing with teaching and research, I was able to find time to attend some sessions. Had this been a more traditional in-person

conference, it would have been relegated to the category of conferences where I look over the schedule and think it looks really interesting and I wish I could attend but I just can't make it work. As a graduate student it is often much more difficult to take the time off for an entire multi-day conference. Here, I was able to make the parts of the conference I could attend fit into my already existing schedule and while I wasn't able to join every session, it was significantly more than none.

In a similar vein, the lack of travel costs and registration fees made the conference more feasible to attend on a graduate student budget. Normally, access to fund for conferences are tied to being a presenter, if available at all. This means that conferences where I didn't have a paper accepted, but merely want a chance to learn about current research or meet people in my field are cost prohibitive. This is not a purely graduate student issue, but one that disproportionately disadvantages members of the field who are either geographically distant or lack institutional support. Virtual conferences increase access and the registration process was as simple as sending an email.

The read-ahead format of SAW II also helped to make the conference material more available despite my personal time constraints. Even the sessions that I wasn't able to attend, I was able to download the papers which were the focus of the sessions. While there is certainly something lost from missing the comments and discussion, the ability to carve out time in the days before and after the conference to read the papers I missed means that I can still grapple with the ideas in my own studies. Additionally, I can treat any burning questions as though they are questions I thought of post-talk at any conference and email the paper's author.

There are some drawbacks to the virtual conference format. Reliance on technology raises multiple issues. First, not everybody has access to the required technology to access the conference. While many of us are being forced to use Zoom as part of our work, there are certainly

those for a whom a Zoom conference is inaccessible. Technological glitches on the hosts ends also create issues. Participants may have inconsistent internet and the ability to share screens and have consistent audio and visual is never a guarantee. While anyone who has been to an in-person conference knows that tech issues are not relegated to the virtual format, they can have a much larger impact as the backup plans for in-person tech failure don't apply at a virtual conference. If the keynote's internet goes down, there's not much that can be done other than rescheduling.

An issue with the virtual format is that interactions can be both awkward and difficult to follow, particularly in the chat. The delay that is an inherent part of the use of Zoom can lead to people waiting to talk and then talking at the same time, such that it's hard to know what was said. At SAW II, there were multiple approaches taken to combat this issue. One was to have people submit their questions in the chat with the chair curating, reading all the questions out loud themselves. This worked fairly well, though there were times when it was clear the chair hadn't quite understood the motivation behind the questions and clarifications were necessary. Another strategy was to have people indicate their desire to ask a question, either by posting in the chat or signaling, and having the chair call on them by name, but letting them ask their own question. This worked well, with the occasional now-familiar need to let people know they were still muted.

Regarding the chat specifically, there was frequently an ongoing discussion happening in the chat alongside the q and a. While this allowed for an increased socialness, it at times made it more difficult to distinguish the questions from the other talk and for people like me who struggle to multitask I felt that I had to make a choice between following the chat or following the audio/video discussion, as I could not focus on both.

If the ASA chooses to host virtual conferences moving forward, I think there are two strategies it should adopt to help with these issues. First, there should be an agreed-on format for

Q and A sessions that is written and given to chairs and participants in advance. It was clear from this experience that a prepared chair particularly makes this portion of the conference run more smoothly and guidelines will help make this a uniform circumstance. Second, I have attended another conference which utilized a separate Q and A function within Zoom, separating it from the chat. Using this functionality makes it much simpler to separate questions from the general thread of discussion, makes questions less likely to be overlooked, and makes the chairs job easier.

One last drawback to a virtual conference is that social interactions over Zoom and missing the opportunity to visit someplace new are simply less fun than seeing people and places in person. This is not really a major concern during the pandemic, as necessity requires these choices. However, post pandemic, the ASA will have to consider whether or not they want to continue having any virtual conferences and this becomes a real tradeoff. For many of us, in addition to hearing research, in-person conferences are a chance to make contacts, explore new cities, and see friends. I think these are valuable things and that the ASA should continue having in-person conference. However, given the accessibility benefits presented at SAW II, I think the ASA should continue having some virtual events in the future so that more members, including graduate students, have the ability to participate.