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I became acquainted with the College Art Association as a freshman art history major. One week in February, all art history classes were peremptorily cancelled, and the faculty, in their entirety, had disappeared from campus. Art history students were informed that our professors—every last one of them—would be attending the College Art Association annual conference. We learned CAA was a crucial organization for all art historians, and that skipping the conference was apparently impossible. It was important news for those of us aspiring to join the profession ourselves someday. This was the one that mattered. It was where faculty connected and reconnected with their peers. CAA, we now knew, was the community in which faculty shared their scholarship, where they encountered the new ideas they brought to our classrooms.

As a graduate student in the 1990s I became a CAA member and attended the conference for the first time. During my graduate years, I was fortunate to serve as a student member on hiring committees at CAA. Then came the years I would present and go on the market. I interviewed for positions at the conference and became an assistant professor. What I had been told years before proved true. CAA was the one that mattered.

The importance of CAA endured without question in my years as a junior faculty member. I published in *caa.reviews*. I eagerly read *caa.news*. There were departmental discussions about the pedagogical ideas presented by CAA, with one such conversation leading to an opportunity to co-teach with another CAA board member on the nineteenth-century between east and west. CAA was, as it had been for my undergraduate mentors, the essential community nourishing my teaching, scholarship, and career.

By the early aughts, however, the whole of the academic landscape had shifted, and CAA, like many scholarly institutions, no longer simply endured unchallenged. Hiring practices changed. Reductions in tenure-tenure track positions, the decline in numbers of full-time faculty hires, and increasing use of remote hiring, destabilized both CAA's revenue streams and its role as a professional pathway. Amid the field's ongoing disciplinary self-scrutiny, other professional organizations, rooted in different scholarly communities, became more compelling for some. It seemed CAA wasn't as vitally important as it had been. Or perhaps it would always be there, even without our full attention, carrying on as an essential voice in support of the arts. We could attend or not attend conferences, perhaps even let dues and membership lapse. The work of CAA would go on as we have always known it to do.

It became increasingly clear to me over the past years, however, that CAA will not go on without active support. Moreover, in our current climate, CAA is more important than ever. So, in addition to attending the conferences and chairing sessions and presenting papers, I joined the education committee, then the professional practices committee, and now the board.

Recently in *The Atlantic*, Tyler Austin Harper pointed out that humanities scholars

can make the case that we are not the stewards of some rigid and exclusionary Western cultural heritage or literary canon but of a millennia-old tradition of human inquiry that is still capable of producing knowledge vital to understanding our present. And above all, we

can start by being honest—publicly honest—about the forces that form, and deform, the humanities today.<sup>1</sup>

While being critical of our histories as practitioners and as an organization, now more than ever, we art historians and critics and artists and designers and curators need a strong and financially stable College Art Association. I believe steadfastly in CAA’s fundamental purposes as defined in its mission statement:

CAA, as the preeminent international leadership organization in the visual arts, promotes these arts and their understanding through advocacy, intellectual engagement, and a commitment to the diversity of practices and practitioners.<sup>2</sup>

I want to participate as actively as possible to assure its continued relevance and strength—for the good of both current and future members, and for the broad flourishing of art and design. I want to do the work it takes to strengthen the organization for our students, colleagues, and community partners. I’ll certainly be communicating plainly to my undergraduate students, as well as my colleagues across campus, why I will be away from campus for a certain week in February.

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<sup>1</sup> Tyler Austin Harper, “The Humanities Have Sown the Seeds of Their Own Destruction,” *The Atlantic* December 19, 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/12/humanities-university-conservative-critics/676890/>.

<sup>2</sup> College Art Association Mission Statement, accessed January 31, 2024, <https://www.collegeart.org/about/mission>.