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2021 State of the Visual Resources Association Address

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2021 State of the Visual Resources Association Address

Abstract

During the remote 2021 Annual Business Meeting at the Annual Conference of the Visual Resources Association, the president highlighted the accomplishments and challenges of the Association in a state of the association presentation. This article provides the transcript.

Keywords

visual resources, executive board, annual report

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Dr. Jeannine Keefer is the president of the Visual Resources Association and the Visual Resources Librarian at the University of Richmond. She is also an architectural historian specializing in the built environment post-World War II. Her research and teaching incorporate digital humanities methods and tools.

Good morning and afternoon,

Welcome to old friends and new colleagues – I’ve given myself five minutes, so this is going to be brief. This has been quite the year in every way possible. A year ago, we were meeting virtually for the first time after members of last year’s board successfully managed the cancellation of our in-person conference and pivoted to offer some of its content virtually throughout the summer (Zoom has come a long way since then). Lael, Sara, and Meghan: you are stars among stars. Throughout the summer, as we all learned to navigate our new normals – which might have involved starting islands in Animal Crossing, learning a new craft, playing as much disc golf as possible, exercising a green thumb, catching up on the reading list, or trying new recipes – our work situations changed in what might be very permanent ways. But as we in the profession know well, we’ve been planning for transitions like this for years. We’ve seen fits and starts with digital humanities work, but our long-time digital collection development, focus on digital pedagogies, and work on access to collections was finally thrust into the spotlight in ways that might have taken years to do otherwise. And there is some gratification in that. Certainly there are still bumps in the road to navigate, but we’ve always known our work is important and now we have had opportunities to shine for communities and administrations that might have (and have) written us off.

In August, the Executive Board made the critical decision to proceed with planning the 2021 conference as a virtual one. The cancellation of two hotel contracts had zero impact on our finances; in fact, this has been a great opportunity to reset – whew! As many of us have pivoted and realized untapped potential in our everyday work, the pandemic provides the association with those same opportunities, even as some progress has been disrupted.

We continue to work on items related to the Strategic Plan and we will see some fruit of that labor in the coming months. The Identity Task Force Report was submitted and accepted in the summer. In that report are recommendations for how we promote ourselves and advocate for the profession. In the fall we met with those in leadership roles to discuss the report and how we can prioritize executing its recommendations. Those conversations revealed two very different responses – one group focused on the potential the recommendations highlighted, while another group was concerned with the very real financial and occupational impact the pandemic has had on members and the potential impact it is going to have on the profession. Membership and conference attendance numbers had been ticking up before the pandemic and we have yet to see the full impact the pandemic has had on our base. The Executive Board hears and understands those hopes and concerns. We have requested feedback on the report from the greater VRA membership via a very short survey to help us prioritize the way we move forward with recommendations. We will re-send the link to the survey after the conference.

The VRA’s structure is based on the volunteer work of its members and the Executive Board continues to discuss and work on ways to nurture members for leadership roles. There are several opportunities for joining and leading the committees and chapters that do the work of the association. You do not need to be a longtime member to serve in a leadership role and I encourage you to attend a committee meeting after the conference if you have even a vague interest. We will be asking committees and chapters to define timelines and tasks for committee and chapter chairs to help you understand the time commitment required of certain positions, as they vary greatly from one committee or position to another. One last word on leadership: the nominating committee will

be recruiting for this year's slate of candidates – treasurer, vice president for conference arrangements, and public relations and communications officer. Serving as a board member can be a very rewarding way to give back to the association, build your resume, hone a skill, and make some great friends. (Please contact Jasmine Burns or any member of the board if you've even faintly are considering serving on the board - we will endeavor to convince you to do it!)

I cannot begin to express my gratitude and awe for the great work the Equitable Action Committee has been doing this year. The Executive Board is thankful to them for their counsel on the joint VRA/VRAF Solidarity statement, work on conference planning and messaging, and the forthcoming solidarity statement with the Asian American Pacific Islander community. The community hours the EAC has hosted have been a safe place to discuss a variety of issues facing members, but also a place to feel connected to one another. Please plan to attend the EAC community hour tomorrow afternoon.

It has been great to see chapters and committees meeting perhaps more often than usual throughout the year with more chances to check in, to share what is working – and what is not – in your work life, discussing work/life balance, and more. For me, one of the strengths of the VRA has always been its collegial atmosphere. I know that the shift to a virtual conference has not allowed for networking in quite the same way as our in-person conferences afford (how many new people have I met over a puzzle in the lobby, buffet bacon and eggs, or a drink at the bar?). However, this virtual format has its advantages – the first being cost. With no hotel contract to meet, we can offer great content at a greatly reduced outlay for members. With obvious benefits to both formats, the Executive Board and conference planning will endeavor to accommodate both in the future. We also see this as the perfect time to try new things and if they fail, they fail – but we won't know unless we try.

And finally, I want to say thank you to my fantastic board and the VRA membership for your contributions to the conference and the association. I look forward to future changes and opportunities to interact with you all online and in person.