

**Society for Visual Anthropology
Presidential Report
to the Long Range Planning Committee
and
the AAA Executive Board**

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President 2004-2005

1. 2005 EVENTS

a) Membership numbers. According to a 2005 document circulated to section leadership, the SVA lost 60 members between the unprecedented high of 620 in November, 2004 and the same month in 2005. This is roughly a 10% loss, comparing unfavorably to the estimated 5% loss of the AAA as a whole during that period. Our loss was anticipated because the SVA raised dues 60% in response to AnthroSource/University of California Press [hereinafter AS/UCP] Management Fee increases, and general disaffection stemming from the Atlanta crisis. As many smaller-section presidents anticipated, individuals, who in the past had been willing to pay to belong to many sections, had lost their willingness. This resulted from the general rising of dues and the inauguration of AnthroSource, which permitted all members, regardless of section, almost-universal access to AAA publications.

b) Financial balances: list any factors affecting Section finances. With the need to pay for “catch-up” publication of two volumes of *Visual Anthropology Review*, as well as the normal publication of two additional volumes, the SVA budget had an unusually high balance in at the beginning of 2005, \$48,305. Since each volume costs about \$7,000 for hard copy publication, the balance will fall to normal levels when these costs are met.

In May, 2005, I received SVA budget figures and saw that my section had been assigned, unannounced, AS/UCP management fees profoundly higher than the previous year. (The fees for 2004 had similarly, without announcement, been much higher than those of 2003.) I worked for four days with Past-President/Treasurer Malcolm Collier on present and past budgets, and projective budgets of uneven accuracy provided by the AAA’s Susan Skomal and Sandy Berlin. Collier and I concluded that AS/UCP management costs, without substantial remuneration from UCP, would bankrupt our section by 2008. [Our calculations are available at: <http://www.societyforvisualanthropology.org/svafinances.html>]

Skomal and Berlin attempted to assuage our fears with budgets professing to show that money coming from UCP to the SVA would prevent our bankruptcy: they identified a line item new for 2005, “digital subscription revenue” (the revenue from libraries subscribing to AnthroSource). These they said would deliver \$4,000 to the SVA in 2005 and \$28,000 in 2008. In truth, by May 2005, SVA had only received \$212! Excuses and promises were made, but when I learned through two anonymous sources that the Skomal/Berlin budget figures were utterly fictitious, I lost confidence in the process. I published my findings in *Anthropology News* (Dec. 2005). There was retaliation. Stacy Lathrop claimed implausibly that my fears of AAA/SVA bankruptcy were only of interest to visual anthropologists. The *AN* relegated my article to the obscurity of page 61, though they did not censor it outright. Lathrop and Berlin did, however, make a “commentary” upon my essay (longer than the original and unprecedented in that it was an official AAA reply to something supposedly of interest only to visual anthropologists), They accused me of being an alarmist. Yet, if their real concern had been that an alarmist was making errors, they would have shown precisely how my alarming fears were based on falsehoods. Instead, suspiciously, they did not reply to the alarms I raised. They did not discuss (1) “digital subscription revenue,” did not mention or explain (2) the imaginary (ultimately deceitful) budget predictions that Skomal and Berlin had sent to pacify me, failed to address (3) the problem that the AAA has not kept its promise (made publicly in November 2003) that AnthroSource will be made available cheaply to third world universities, and ignored my point that (4) the AAA’s official recommendations – for how sections should pay for new AS/UCP management fees – are unworkable. I will take up these issues again below.

To read my original article, the Berlin/Lathrop “commentary” and my dissection of it, see: <http://www.societyforvisualanthropology.org/financialcrisis.html> .

c) Washington meeting activities. Because of unusually high member numbers in 2004, the SVA was allowed an unprecedented five and a half hours of invited sessions. In all, we had eleven panels, two workshops and a poster session. We celebrated the 20th year of the *AAA Film, Video and Multimedia Festival*, the chief benefit that

the SVA offers AAA membership as a whole. We also celebrated the 21st year of our annual “preconference,” the Visual Research Conference, which had a record number of attendees. Because events were postponed by Atlanta, in 2005 we granted two “Lifetime Achievement Awards,” one to filmmaker Robert Gardner (*Dead Birds, Forest of Bliss*, etc.) on the occasion of his 80th birthday, and the other to John Bishop. In addition, as we do every year, we granted about ten film awards, some to student work.

d) The SVA has no spring meetings.

e) Website development. In addition to publishing my commentary, counter-commentaries and budgets concerning the AnthroSource Crisis, the SVA’s three-year old website this year publishes much information of interest to members and other people in visual professions. Topics this year include: publications/conferences; calls for papers; job announcements; “From-the-Field” incidental reports; how to subscribe; a member’s forum; visual anthropology news; names and contact information for the SVA board of directors; links to an independent web site about our journal; how to request an issue of the journal from the AAA when it fails to arrive (a most serious problem for our members; one year more than 80% of our members failed to receive an issue); the announcement of international festivals, and useful links.

f) Outreach efforts. One of my objections to the AAA “official recommendations” for holding back section bankruptcy refers to the idea that sections should seek to gain new members by advertising in other sections’ media. Given the general loss of AAA membership, rising dues with no end in sight and the disincentive to join multiple sections created by AnthroSource, I have refused to allow sections to have our mailing list and have not sought mailing lists from other sections. Stealing members from one another will neither create a sense of collegiality nor will it increase absolute income for the AAA. The recommendation is misguided.

Our most obvious international outreach effort this year came from the film festival which gave awards to a number of international production, notably several from South Africa. Our festival has gained considerable prestige in the last decade and our awards are important to filmmakers. Perhaps their primary importance to filmmakers is that they facilitate the receipt of future grants. They also offer potential distributors our recommendation.

g) Changes in by-laws. We did not change by-laws. However, because the 2004 SVA Business Meeting did not have a quorum and most of our planned 2004 activities failed to materialize, in March 2005 the SVA board voted to allow its 2004 members another year of service. If we had not done this, the Atlanta crisis would have denied 2004 board members the opportunity to serve. We will have an unusually high number of new board members for 2006.

2. FUTURE PLANS

a) Journal up to date. After more than five years, *Visual Anthropology Review* has come up to date, due to double-time publishing in 2005. We are now in a position to publish our journal on time. Unfortunately, the costs of AS/UCP management fees threaten to bankrupt our entire organization by 2008. The AnthroSource strategy to facilitate international scholarship may end our section’s capacity to publish scholarly works.

b) Collaborations. The SVA and the International Visual Anthropology Association are moving forward on co-authorship of ethical guidelines for the production of visual ethnographies and social scientific media. This will complement the *SVA Guidelines for the Professional Evaluation of Ethnographic Media*, approved unanimously by the AAA Executive Board in 2002. I was that document’s principal author.

3) RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE LONG RANGE PLANNING COMMITTEE AND THE EXECUTIVE BOARD.

a) AAA’s expenses exceed its income. AnthroSource/UC Press management fees costs are escalating. In response, sections raise membership dues. Raised dues, along with conference fees, hotel rooms, restaurant expenses, and air flights, are pushing members’ budgets to the breaking point. The AAA is losing members rapidly. Although sections have been told to meet new AnthroSource expenses by acquiring new members, they have no viable way to do so except by stealing them from each other. The creation of new services, another fundraising strategy promoted by administration, requires more unremunerated labor from already overtaxed board and regular

AAA members. AS/UCP fees must stop going up. Substantial annual increases, unilaterally imposed, are not acceptable. If digital-revenue returns are not part of the AAA's contract with UCP, they should be. Sections should receive monthly updates on UCP's marketing progress to insure adherence to contract. Small sections' existence depends on it.

b) The promise must be kept. After two years, the AAA's promise to provide AnthroSource at low cost to Third World libraries is still on hold. This is not acceptable.

c) The Board should consider as an unhealthy sign the fact that my criticism was suppressed. Judging from the contradictions and errors I found in trying to learn the AnthroSource facts, it is clear that disturbing financial consequences of AS and the UCP contract have not been openly admitted to all AAA leadership. More AAA members need to question section finances. The Long-Range Planning Committee and the Executive Board cannot sustain a wait-and-see position. The AAA will learn from UCP in May, 2006, whether "digital subscription revenues" can actually provide a halt to bankruptcy, as Skomal and Berlin attempted to persuade me. If the 2006 figures are as disappointing as those of the 2005 launch year, not only the small sections of the AAA as a whole will be in serious jeopardy.

d) The need for change. At present the AAA's AnthroSource contract does not require UCP to provide crucial digital-subscription revenue. We need these funds. Yet, even with some revenue flow, small publishing sections are in serious financial trouble. Given the fact that official recommendations are unworkable, the administration's covert hope appears to be a policy to indefinitely delay the crisis by indefinitely increasing dues. With our budgets already at the breaking point, the AAA Executive Board needs to consider alternatives to AnthroSource in its present form. The UCP contract will be renegotiated in 2007. In the renegotiation, we need to demand significant revenue from AnthroSource or find ways to lower the cost of contracted services. We can do this.

e) Consider cheaper means of digital distribution. One way would be for the entire AnthroSource collection to be put on DVDs, distributed to all members and all eligible under-funded, third world universities. Every year, the DVD can be updated and only the current year's issues would be online. Right now, policy is that only current members and subscribers are allowed online access to publications. If we are trying to advance scholarship, then eligible libraries and all members should receive DVDs at cost. Members who drop out will not receive DVDs with new publications. DVDs can be given high functionality. They are also infinitely cheaper than AnthroSource. Even if the DVD idea is rejected, many of the AnthroSource bells and whistles do not contribute to scholarship in a meaningful way. It need not cost the half-million dollars a year that UCP is charging us to keep 90,000 pages of PDF files on an Internet server.

f) SVA Officers in 2006

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