

FotoFocus Biennial Already Planning Ways to Ring in 2016

BY STEVEN ROSEN · DECEMBER 31ST, 2014 · THE BIG PICTURE



A viewer attending the 2014 FotoFocus-sponsored Vivian Maier exhibit. - Photo: Tony Walsh

Most of us are still reflecting on the ending year, or at least looking at 2015 with just the vaguest of notions of what we'll do with it. But the folks at the FotoFocus Biennial are already looking *past* it. They're making plans for their next big celebration of lens-based art in 2016.

The members of the nonprofit organization, which was founded by businessman and photographer Thomas Schiff (former *CityBeat* publisher) and whose executive director is Mary Ellen Goeke, were pleased with the 2014 installment of the month-long festival. It was primarily held in October, with some 50 venues presenting exhibits — some of which extended into later months. (A few are still on display; see fotofocuscincinnati.org for details.)

Based on attendance reports from 28 participating venues, 61,000 people attended FotoFocus exhibits and events through October. (That number, which pleased Goeke, includes her organization's own curated presentations as well as exhibits at nonprofit venues — including museums — that received programming grants from FotoFocus.)

So FotoFocus seems to be establishing itself on the city's arts calendar. The headlining event during the intense "long weekend" in mid-October that was the core of the Biennial — a comic monologue by celebrity filmmaker/photographer/raconteur John Waters — virtually sold out Memorial Hall's 450-seat auditorium.

But equally impressive was that a scholarly keynote lecture on Civil War photography by Jeff L. Rosenheim, photography curator at Metropolitan Museum of Art, drew 250. FotoFocus recorded all the lectures and panel discussions at Memorial Hall except for Waters, and they have just become available online at fotofocusbiennial.org/videos.

Additionally, FotoFocus merited press coverage of some type from 19 national and international outlets (in addition to local ones).

The basic structure of FotoFocus seems secure: the core Biennial event of special programming at a key central location, surrounded by longer-lasting exhibits at venues throughout the region.

Also secure is the overall curator/artistic director, Kevin Moore of New York, who has been asked to stay on and will visit Cincinnati in January to begin planning for 2016.

His own curation proved very discerning in 2014; he put together a show of David Benjamin Sherry's work just as that photographer was on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* and his Vivian Maier show coincided with the year that the rediscovered street photographer's story became international news.

Here are a few things already being talked about for 2016. Like 2014's "Photography in Dialogue," there will be a broad unifying theme. Goeke said it will be decided early, in January or February 2015, to help direct those venues wanting to apply for exhibition grants.

Also, there may again be a headliner like John Waters whose celebrity extends beyond the world of photography, or whose work with still photography is secondary to his/her accomplishments in film. As an example, Goeke mentioned David Lynch, but said some renowned still photographers like Cindy Sherman or Joel Meyerowitz could also work in that slot.

And there is a big change under consideration: moving the core programming, the Biennial's heart, to the center of downtown from Over-the-Rhine. The daytime events, some of which struggled to attract audiences at Memorial Hall, could then be in a smaller venue, like the Contemporary Arts Center's Black Box room, while larger ones could be across the street at Aronoff Center for the Arts' 437-seat Jarson-Kaplan Theater. Meanwhile, the Art Hub, which was in Washington Park this year, could also move to downtown and serve as an information center.

I'd like to suggest a couple other things. Many of the far-flung participating galleries had excellent shows that deserved to be seen by more. As part of events connected to several of Hebrew Union College's FotoFocus-related shows, that campus' American Jewish Archives sponsored a well-attended bus tour of Cincinnati Jewish sites, especially in the West End. It'd be great if FotoFocus itself could offer some similar weekend guided bus excursions to shows. That'd especially help the Dayton-area venues.

Similarly, and this is a little gimmicky perhaps, but maybe the different venues could stamp the FotoFocus catalogues of their visitors. Those who attend all venues could be eligible for a prize photographic print.

Finally, while the nonprofit FotoFocus organization itself can't undertake this, perhaps an affiliated entrepreneur could start a Cincinnati Photo Fair for an October weekend, open to regional photographers interested enough in selling and displaying work to pay a fee.

I'm sure we'll be hearing much more from FotoFocus in the year to come.