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WIDEWALLS

WE TALKED ABOUT THE FOTOFOCUS BIENNIAL WITH THE DIRECTOR KEVIN MOORE

Photography• Angie Kordic

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Throughout the month of October 2016, Cincinnati will be home to a month-long celebration of photography and lens-based arts. The rich program of the event is surely highlighted by eight major exhibitions curated by FotoFocus biennial Director Kevin Moore, who conceived this year's program around the documentary nature of the photographic medium. What are the alternative understandings of the documentary photograph? Are they objective or indeed proper sources of fantasy? These questions will now be answered through the works of renowned photographers such as Zanele Muholi, Jackie Nickerson and Roe Ethridge, who will have his first museum exhibition ever for this occasion, as well as a series of talks, lectures, tours, screenings and performances. The institutions and artists participating at this year's edition will break apart the assumptions about photography's documentary character by emphasizing the medium's natural tendency to reshape and distort the visible world.

The 2016 FotoFocus Biennial will also present [video artwork](#) as part of the lens-based culture, and we talked to Director Kevin Moore about the relationship between these two creative fields, the importance of the presence of film at such events and so much more. Scroll down to have a read.



Left: Zanele Muholi, Vuyelwa Vuvu Makubetse Daveyton Johannesburg, 2013. © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of the artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery / Right: Jackie Nickerson – Ruth, 2012. Digital c-print, dimensions variable. © Jackie Nickerson. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The Influence of FotoFocus

Widewalls: Can you tell us about how you got involved in FotoFocus?

Kevin Moore: I curated a big traveling exhibition at the Cincinnati Art Museum in 2010 called *Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-1980* and got to know Tom Schiff, founder of FotoFocus then. When James Crump, curator at the art museum and co-founder of FotoFocus, left, leaving Cincinnati photo-curator-less, FotoFocus asked me to be their Curator and Artistic Director. This is my second Biennial and I organized the Mapplethorpe symposium last year.

Widewalls: How would you compare the state of photography in New York City, where you reside, to the one in Cincinnati? What changed since the inception of FotoFocus in this area?

KM: A lot is happening in art in New York, of course, and around the world (I go to a lot of international art fairs), so I have the fun job of proposing what I think is the best of art photography to the various institutions in Cincinnati. They decide what will best excite their audiences. We do a lot of "first museum show" exhibitions: Roe Ethridge this year at the CAC, for example. It's his first US museum show, oddly enough. In terms of what has changed, there is a lot of momentum now for art photography in Cincinnati. There are 60+ exhibitions at participating venues this year—those are in addition to the eight I myself am curating. FotoFocus has generated a lot of excitement for photography. The mayor is designating October the Month of Photography in a ceremony next Wed, Oct 5.



Left: Roe Ethridge – Me and Auggie, 2015. Dye sublimation print on aluminum, 45 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York, and Greengrassi, London / Right: Zanele Muholi – Bester II, Paris, 2014. © Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of the artist and Yancey Richardson Gallery

Photography, the Undocument

Widewalls: Talking about "Photography, the Undocument" as this year's theme, you're focusing on imagery that comes from, of course, documentary work. Your aim is to show a side to it that demystifies the ability of the medium to merely capture reality as it is. Why is it important to do that?

KM: You could say all of photography comes from "documentary work." It's an essential aspect of photography, or "fantasy of realism," I like to say. It's an angle for people to consider when viewing any photograph made for any purpose, art or otherwise.

Widewalls: Since documentary photography is quite a vast genre, what was your guiding concept in choosing the images, and the photographers, to include in the show?

KM: I wouldn't say "documentary photography" is the basis of our event. Roe Ethridge isn't a documentary photographer, nor is Marlo Pascual, Zanele Muholi, Jackie Nickerson, Nan Goldin et al. In terms of choosing, I start with the major institutional shows (CAC, Freedom Center) and work out from there, finding complementary bodies of work and trying to offer a range of perspectives: historical, group shows, film, a collection show. There's a moment when we see the website and the catalogue layouts and all the images we've gathered for press and otherwise gel and all the intuitive decision making suddenly pays off.

Widewalls: The highlight of this year's edition seems to be Roe Ethridge, who will have his first solo museum exhibition in the United States. How did this show finally come to be and what is it in Ethridge's work that earned him this opportunity?

KM: I think Roe Ethridge is one of the most important photographers of his generation and I know many people in the art world who agree with me. There has been a perception that his work can be hard to understand but we've framed the show in an accessible way, while not oversimplifying, and are presenting something that is epic and visual, unlike what we've seen in his more modestly scaled gallery shows. Roe and I worked closely together to frame the show this way and to make the selection, which includes video and sculpture as well as photographs.



Robin Rhode – *The Moon is Asleep*, 2016. Super 8mm film transferred to digital HD, duration: 1 minute, 50 seconds, edition of 5.
 Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong

The Relationship Between Photo and Video Art

Widewalls: Because FotoFocus is a celebration of both photography and lens-based art, you also curated two exhibitions that focus on film. What can the visitors expect from these shows?

KM: *New Slideshow* is this year's main film exhibition and includes works by some artists we think of as photographers, such as Nan Goldin, and mostly artists we don't think of as photographers: William E. Jones, John Stezaker, Patricia Esquivias, among others. *New Slideshow* looks at the ways in which artists are using sequences of still images to make film with various kinds of narratives. Nearly all of the other exhibitions, though, have a film or audio component: Jackie Nickerson's exhibition includes four very quiet films, similar yet different from her photographs; Robin Rhode (who is also in *New Slideshow*) has a selection of three video works on view in relation to his compatriot Zanele Muholi, whose exhibition does not include film/video but audio of the various participants in her *Faces and Phases* series telling their stories as black South African lesbians.

Widewalls: What does it mean to have film in this kind of event? Do they draw as much attention as the photographs? What was the response of the audience so far?

KM: Film is closely related to photography, having its basis in still photography, of course. But I always like to push the boundaries with photography and show it in relation to other media: film, video, painting, sculpture. Photography has long been isolated as a medium, which I and others find increasingly absurd. I like to show historical work in relation to contemporary as well, in order to show artistic legacies but also to show the relevance of history to issues we face today.

Widewalls: What do you hope for when it comes to the future editions of FotoFocus?

KM: Expansion. Of spaces, experiences, and the kinds of work we're showing and the ideas those works are generating. I don't see any limitations in terms of the medium nor the community of Cincinnati. Things kind of happen somewhere specific and everywhere at the same time in this era of the internet and air travel. The institutional shows will be open until early next spring so even people who can't make it to the opening week (Oct 6-9) have time to get to Cincinnati for Roe Ethridge, Zanele Muholi, et al. And there are catalogues, gallery guides, etc. We make publications to distribute and keep. It helps the artists and adds to our legacy.

Featured image: Kevin Moore, artistic director and curator of FotoFocus. Photo by Wilson Reyes. All images courtesy FotoFocus Biennial Cincinnati.