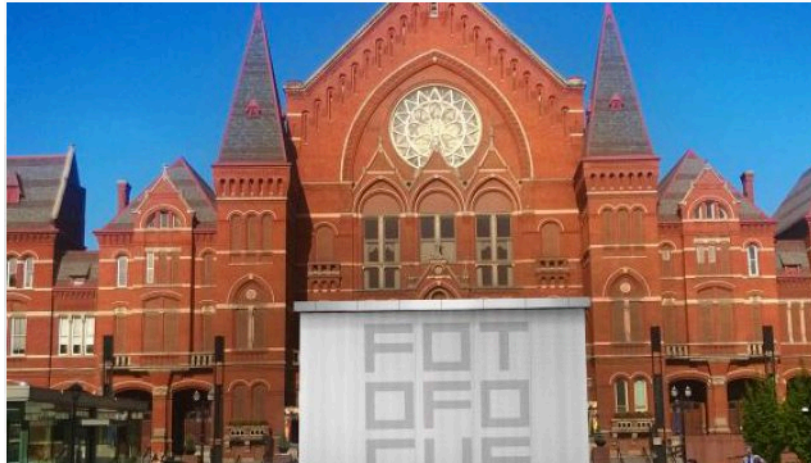


# LABKULTUR

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## Instagram, Is It Art?

### A visit to FotoFocus Biennial 2014 in Cincinnati, curated by Kevin Moore

With the fury of talent and information about talent that we are able to discover via digital culture every day, we hardly need cities to provide new focal points for art anymore. Every once in a while, however, one does emerge that is compelling enough to make us desert our cyberdesks for a few minutes. This is what Cincinnati, Ohio, has done with **FotoFocus Biennial 2014**, the month-long celebration of photography and lens-based art that I deserted my desk to visit when it kicked off on October 8.

During the month-long show, this quiet working class town in Middle America transformed itself around its historic Washington Park to showcase the special exhibitions curated by FotoFocus Artistic Director **Kevin Moore**. Perhaps exemplifying the strong local Germanic heritage and ethic, these exhibitions, in their innovatively nomadic pop-up spaces, pondered deeply the role of photography both historically and psychologically, as a narrative art form intimately related to the evolution of our understanding of realism and personal identity.

#### From Vivian Maier to Acacia Brinley

An exhibition of **Vivian Maier's** self-portraits, for example, were curated to emphasize her desire to see and discover herself. Yet set in their time, in the self-effacing 1970s, these were executed largely with other subjects, as if to take a self-portrait with the self alone, especially as a woman, was too close an act to exhibitionism. When we discussed this show for *Aesthetica*, Moore wondered if Maier's autobiographical work was a precursor to the contemporary selfie:

<http://www.aestheticamagazine.com/blog/review-vivian-maier-fotofocus-biennale-cincinnati/>



Instagram Picture by Amalia Uiman

To elaborate on this theme in the contemporary setting, Moore also curated a live Instagram exhibition, where image feeds came through on a site that screened simultaneously online, in the FotoFocus pop-up Hub, and at the live debate where Vogue Photography Director Ivan Shaw, architect José Garcia, publisher Nion McEvoy, and 21c Museum Hotel team architect Haviland Argo, discussed the role of the selfie and social media art in 21st century culture. The show, which had a total 1,187 posts, 32,867 likes and 1,674 comments, had a moment that was stranger than fiction when a photograph of Ivan Shaw on stage commenting on the photo of Ivan Shaw in the Instagram feed that was also on stage, echoed the vision of Andy Warhol's 15 minutes of fame through the amphitheatre. Though in cyber-style, it was more like fifteen seconds.

In the wake of this moment, Shaw bemoaned his vanity and compared himself unfavourably to the 17 year old Instagram sensation Acacia Brinley, who with over 2.5 million followers, is a micro-celebrity making today's version of big business. "Is this photography?" the panel mused, about images of the teen Internet star, whose amateur selfie language is today's signature visual currency, a market value that even advertising and high art slip into, to emulate the everyday and the familiar that sells.

Shaw reminisced about the Grand Vogue Photoshoot, where hair, makeup, styling, sets and professional photography all coalesce to create imaginative, iconic imagery. "But we have to keep up with technology, and the quality there is different," he said about Vogue online, while predicting that once we master technology better, we will begin to focus more on content quality. "Digital generation art is in its infancy," he concluded. The panel concurred by reflecting on how Millennials work: "It's not print, it's not film, it's their own digital medium that features speed, spontaneity, democracy; a new language".



Making An Instagram Moment: Acacia Brinley

### The square - and inappropriate imagery

Interesting observations were made about Instagram's square format, and how by alluding to the polaroid and a nostalgia for the square world where everything was safer, it becomes a platform that is much more popular than other digital sites that don't use censorship or romantic aesthetics - a popularity that suggests that even racy selfie makers are attracted to some form of discipline.

There was a glaring absence of the actual selfie taker from the panel, which was especially noticeable in the questions about whether privacy is over, whether narcissism is an epidemic, and whether over-sharing is diluting the meaning of cultural participation - when selfie takers know all too well that the self *is* culture on the digital platform.

Absent too were images made by the selfie generation, maybe much to the relief of the FotoFocus executives who worried that floating an open exhibition would invite inappropriate imagery. The history of art overflows with inappropriate imagery, so if this had happened it may have been on point.



Self-portrait, 1970, by Vivian Maier



### DIY as a way out of the ruins

In his introduction to *Real to Real: Photographs from the Traina Collection*, a beautiful book of photographs published in 2012, Kevin Moore predicted that, "The real - and such synonyms as the actual, the authentic - is certainly something we all strive to know. Particularly today, in an ultramediated culture of tepid Facebook friendships and corporate propaganda and political spin and industrially manufactured foods, the desire to cut through the layers separating us from the real is more urgent than ever".

Moore's take on how this hyperrealism debate has found its home in Cincinnati is thoughtful, too. "The Germanic way of life, the practicality and innovation with respect for historicity, makes Cincinnati a logical hub for the triumph of photography as an art form, a medium known for being objective, and for recording life as it is. The death of the analogue, Modernism hysteria, the 2008 economic crisis coalesce interestingly in a place like Cincinnati, a city at the tail end of the world but a place that involves bringing the past into the present through rejuvenation. There is a pragmatic acceptance here of failed Modernism and its utopian visions of rational science and good politics, which were supposed to have resulted in egalitarianism. Institutions are in ruins, Vogue photoshoots are in ruins, and what's replacing these is the DIY photography that is happening on Instagram".

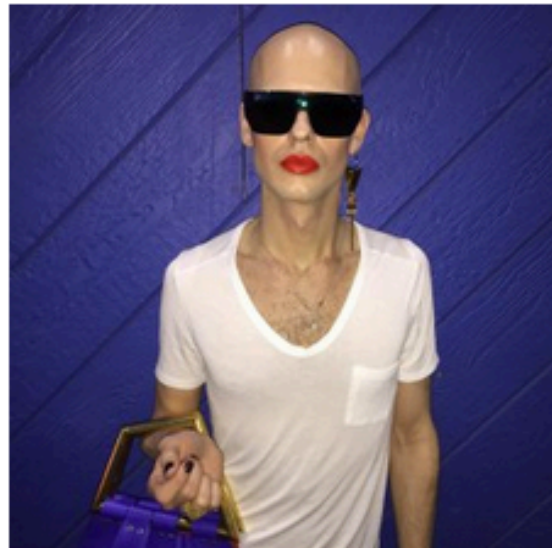


Experimental Identity on Instagram

### The self can be culture, amateur photography can be art

It's a very new idea that the self can be culture and that amateur photography can be art. As its infancy gives way to more clarity, it could be that the democratic digital platform that brings us together across borders of language, national interest and politics, does what Modernism failed to do by uniting us as a human tribe - and images are more powerful than words here because they are about feeling, and are therefore deeper than the intellect. A group of innovative girl artists are taking on this subject, Jillian Mayer, Mary Bond and Amalia Ulman, and beginning to show us where the professional artist and the personal experience coalesce in this new digital art space.

Though photography has long made special claims for representing reality, in the era of computer-generated imagery and Instagram bedroom snaps we ironically no longer assume that any image is an accurate record of life. What this experiment in temporal sampling that Cincinnati's FotoFocus Biennial 2014 has offered with its gentle weaving together of an intact photographic narrative, which takes us from the timid view of the self through to the self as central, is actually how much this art form can serve as a gateway to a larger reality. Instagram, with its 150 million users and 20 billion pictures, is an always changing virtual art world representing the crowd of us all navigating our shopping malls and airports, Disneyland resorts and domestic spaces, as a mirror of the present. As we move through photography's history onto the Instagram stage, one moment after the other triggers our own sense of the patterns in our lives; a more-than-realism experience whereby the self is at the same time the centre of individualism and the portal to trans-personalism. We may be afraid to emulate tweens, we may long for the days of decorum, we may doubt the power of digital oneness. But as we fall into the naive and the intimate digital gaze where image after image of real people asserting their identities merge into one human voice, we begin to recognize it. This creates a potentially numinous experience in the searching subject, something good art should always hope to provoke.



Experimental Identity on Instagram 2