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Q&A: Kevin Moore On FotoFocus and Breaking Photography Out of Its Box

by Anneliese Cooper 09/10/14 7:00 AM EDT



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Ryan McGinley's "Helena," 2010, and Vivian Maier's "Self-Portrait," 1959, are on view as part of Cincinnati's FotoFocus Biennial.

(Courtesy FotoFocus Biennial/ © Vivian Maier/ Maloof Collection, Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York)



Kevin Moore, artistic director and curator of FotoFocus. Photo by Wilson Reyes

Now in its second edition, Cincinnati's [FotoFocus Biennial](#) (October 8-November 1) brought on Kevin Moore, a New York-based curator, writer, and teacher, to fill the role of artistic director. Moore curated six core exhibitions for the biennial around the theme "[Photography in Dialogue](#)," an idea that will be further explored during the biennial's opening weekend with a keynote address on Civil War photography from Jeff L. Rosenheim, photography curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and a performance by filmmaker John Waters. ARTINFO caught up with Moore just before the biennial's opening to discuss his curatorial process, his Instagram-centric show, and his thoughts on the bounds of the photographic medium.

How did you come to be involved with the FotoFocus Biennial? What drew you to it?

I did a big show at the Cincinnati Art Museum in 2010 called “Starburst: Color Photography from America, 1970-1980.” It had figures in it like Steven Shore and William Eggleston. At the time, the museum director was courting me to be the photo curator, but I didn’t want to leave New York — or be a museum curator, really — so I just curated the show. Tom Schiff, who is the founder of FotoFocus, funded “Starburst,” and I met him then. And when the curator of photography, James Crump, left the museum a couple of years ago, Cincinnati lost its one photo curator, so Tom and Mary Ellen Goeke, who are the directors of FotoFocus, came to me and asked me if I wanted to be the curator at large for FotoFocus — which also meant to kind of be curator at large of different museums in Cincinnati, the Taft and the CAC [Contemporary Arts Center] as well. So that sounded like a pretty good gig to me.

I liked Cincinnati a lot. It’s a city that is still distinct. It’s not just a kind of generic American city; it’s got its own history and personality. It’s a very old city, like Philadelphia, and it’s also a bit southern, which I find kind of interesting. They’re hungry for good shows, and they know the difference between some mediocre thing and a good show.

Could you talk a bit about the “Photography in Dialogue” theme of this year’s edition? What is the dialogue between, and how do you see that manifesting through the program?

I think the theme was kind of set by the first museum exhibition we placed, which was the [Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs](#) exhibition at the CAC. Those artists to me feel very much clued in by history — they very much respond to 1920s modernism and things like that, and also maybe Robert Frank’s road trips across America. Their work is very conscious of those traditions, but at the same time, they’re very much of the current generation. They’re very youthful and kind of manically creative. There’s a good bit of irony in it; there’s a good bit of delight in it. I’ve loved their work, and they haven’t had a show in the US until now, and I thought it would go over well. And even though it’s photographic in its basis, it’s got other elements as well: They have sculptures and there’s film or video in the exhibition; there’s a found piece.

It just to me feels like the way contemporary artists work. It's really harder and harder to say that someone is just a photographer. I've been often frustrated by the narrow, sort of ghetto idea of photography as this art that's separate from everything else. For me, photography has always been so promiscuous, so involved with everything else — not just now. So I've been looking for ways of trying to think about how to integrate or reintegrate photography into the larger world of art-making, and to make its relevance to our lives clearer — and one of those things was to try to break it out of its little box. Other people have been doing this in different kinds of ways; the word “expanded” is a word that's been used in photography for some time. But I thought if we said it was a “dialogue” that it might be a little more accessible as an idea.

So the dialogue essentially is about contemporary photography and its own past, which you see for example in the Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs exhibition, but also in the [David Sherry](#) exhibition, which is his photographs with photographs by Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins. It's also a dialogue between photography and other mediums, which is in Taiyo and Nico's show — sculpture and sound and film — and then there's a big film exhibition that's part of the biennial called “[Screenings](#),” which was at Paris Photo LA back in April. Then, it's also the idea of collaboration. It seems like a lot more artists are working these days in pairs or in groups — as corporations, almost.

Speaking of the interaction between photography and film, the biennial is billed as a celebration of “lens-based art,” which would seem to encompass both. What's the balance between the two at FotoFocus?

It is a photography-based event, certainly, but I think that it's just an attempt to say that photography is a very wide-ranging activity and that there is no one single narrow definition of what art photography is. So in the selection of different shows, including the film shows, I tried to go out of bounds a bit with artists who use other media, such as film

It's interesting what happens when you start going around and asking gallerists, “Does Wilhelm Sasnal do films?” And they say, “Why yes!” Because you never see these things exhibited. Film's kind of in the dark; it's not really out there in the gallery system much. So I sat in galleries' back rooms and watched tons of films for six months and came up with my selection. What I found, though, was I could see that a lot of these artists had a history of photography or different bodies of photographic work in mind. For example, Slater Bradley, his film called “Sequoia” is an homage to Chris Marker's “La Jetée,” which is of course a film from the 1960s, which is entirely composed of still images — a slideshow more or less.

I would say that I've looked for ways to take the usual, expected photography exhibition and to let that kind of careen out of bounds a little bit, which I think is much more true to what photography is and where it's going in the future.

Aside from “Screenings,” was that the guiding principle behind choosing the other topics for these six central exhibitions you curated?

I think one of the beauties of doing something like this is you can do it fast, and it's much more of a think-on-your-feet exercise than it is curating a museum show, where you have a long lead time and everything is planned out years in advance, but then arrives kind of too late. I always feel museum shows, especially for contemporary art, are a little bit behind the moment. I think for me, the beauty of it was being able to grab at things that I saw happening.

I was looking for a range of things that could satisfy lots of visitors but also engage this idea of photography as something that's a little bit hard to cage. So I think putting it all together was kind of an intuitive exercise, but I think there's a good range there, and I think there are some challenging things — more intellectually challenging things and less intellectually challenging things, at least on the surface.

In that vein, can you talk a bit about the genesis of the Instagram-based exhibition [FotoGram@ArtHub](#)? Do you think Instagram has a real effect on art photography — positive or negative?

I come at social media in general with a lot of skepticism, even though I'm very kind of populist in my thinking about things. Instagram is the first social media tool that I've actually become interested in and started using and look at obsessively and those kinds of things, and I find it a little bit disturbing. For example, I follow my 12-year-old nephew on Instagram. He's out in Seattle, and he's posting selfies all the time — like, “here I am sitting at my desk,” “here I am making a face.” I said to my sister, “I think you should have a discussion with him about selfies and narcissism.” But you know, all young people are doing that now.

So I guess the other question is, “Are there legitimate artists being born on Instagram?” And there are people with tons and tons of followers for taking a picture of beautiful sky and things like that, and that all seems to me incredibly kitsch. But it's a phenomenon that's happening. They're getting a bigger following than legitimate curated art exhibitions, so I find the whole thing a big question mark.

I think that what we're trying to do is to set up something that's kind of an experiment. And at the end of the week, on Saturday night at five o'clock, will be a panel discussion about that exhibition and social media and its impact on art photography proper. The people on the panel are from very different perspectives, so it'll be interesting to see what happens at that discussion.

Do you think that the availability of camera phones and photo-editing tools like Instagram is making more photographers, or is that just producing a greater glut of images to wade through?

I think the latter. I think it becomes increasingly important in life to have people who are editors and curators. It's almost gotten to the point where it's not just true of photography but everything — that it's not so much looking to people who are making cool new stuff, it's looking to the people who can sort through the stuff and put together a core, meaningful, beautiful mass of things.

Given the series of questions like that in photography — from “is it art” to worrying over digital to Instagram — do you have any thoughts as to the next major photographic “crisis” on the horizon, or are we still too enmeshed in this one?

Yeah, I think we're just kind of getting on the horse with this wave of technology. “Crisis” is the right word, though, because I think in the history of photography, there's always been this hysteria around changes in technology, and I always say that it's a thinly masked hysteria about our anxieties about changes in the world in general. There was a moment in 2008 where I remember there were all these conferences about “Is photography over? Is photography dead?” They had all the experts in the world to discuss this crisis in the medium, and to me it just seemed so ridiculous, because the technology's always been changing, and it's just emblematic of larger shifts in technology, which always make people nervous. I think that it really jars our sense of reality and grounding and tradition to address these changes, but maybe part of the way that we work through it is by adapting to the new technologies and talking about what it means.