

# AEQAI

## The Messy Democracy of Photography: An Interview with FotoFocus's Kevin Moore and Mary Ellen Goeke

October 4th, 2014 | Published in \*, September 2014

1989 was a watershed year for the art of photography in Cincinnati. Kristin Spangenberg published her catalogue *Photographic Treasures from the Cincinnati Art Museum*, which recorded the results of her having been given funding to purchase one hundred photographs to give the Museum's existing but scattershot photographic holdings some shape and a sure anchor in excellence. There may not have been many surprises in the assemblage, but surprise was not the intention. The goal was to announce—to the public, to other museums, to potential donors—that the museum was serious about collecting and exhibiting a new category of artwork. The CAM was neither the first nor the last American art museum to formalize its interest in photographs, which—aside from a few specialized or forward-thinking institutions—might as likely be found in libraries as in curated departments, though museum libraries continue to disgorge their treasures from the stacks to the walls, as we can see in the CAM's current show of 19<sup>th</sup> century French photographer Edouard Baldus, selected by the CAM's new Associate Curator of Photography, Brian Sholis.

1989 was also the year that of one of Cincinnati's most convulsive art events ever, the exhibition formally known as "The Perfect Moment," but widely still referred to as simply, "the Mapplethorpe show" at the CAC, should have opened at the Corcoran before coming to Cincinnati in 1990. An erotic classicist whose finished products were mostly about as spontaneous as an Ansel Adams sunset, Mapplethorpe drew huge crowds and, of course, the police. Though in clearer-minded retrospect, his photographs are unlikely to be considered attempts to capture the perfect moment (Mapplethorpe was no Cartier-Bresson and generally treated people, flowers, and even statues like statues), the show served as a kind of perfect moment in the history linking Cincinnati and photography. On this side of the show's timeline, we can see that Dennis Barrie was soon to be on his way out as Director of the CAC, that Simon Leis would soon never again be a powerful (and prohibitive) shaper of Cincinnati's culture, that public funding for the arts would never again be a steadily growing sum, and that photography as an art form was worth defending for a significant demographic alignment, including a substantially younger audience who never doubted its fundamental seriousness. It is also probably true that the Mapplethorpe show was the most important photographic event in Cincinnati between 1848, when the monumental series of daguerreotypes of Cincinnati's waterfront was made, and 2012, when the first FotoFocus was staged.

On the occasion of the start of the second edition of FotoFocus, which has been unfolding around us since late September and will reach its apex from October 8 through October 12 with an extraordinary collection of speakers, panels, exhibitions, and films, I spoke on behalf of *Aeqai* to Kevin Moore, the curator and artistic director of FotoFocus 2014, and Mary Ellen Goeke, its Executive Director. We did not talk much about the nearly fifty photography-related shows either directly supported or inspired by FotoFocus, though they make up a remarkable list whose range can be more fully appreciated at the event's website, [www.fotofocusbiennial.org](http://www.fotofocusbiennial.org). Our conversation was more about some of the fundamental management and curatorial decisions that went into the programming and how the particular nature of photographic media complicates and enriches the tasks FotoFocus is setting for itself.

At the very least, FotoFocus is a coalition of the willing. Its central organization encouraged institutions to apply for funding to support photography shows of all sorts, with FotoFocus providing money to cover "installation, framing, the nuts and bolts" of putting up shows, Goeke explained, plus providing access to FotoFocus's marketing arm. By and large, commercial galleries are on their own. "We're not a commercial fair with dealers and booths," Goeke explained. FotoFocus is not looking to break sales records or attract the glitterati, but to educate the local audience, excite it about the range of experiences photography offers, and above all, "to create a buzz around photography in Cincinnati." There was an application form and an evaluation process that started in October 2013 and ended up provided support of some sort to about 95% of the applicants.

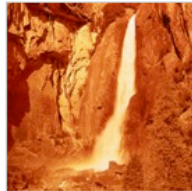
It is complicated and very ambitious to call yourself a "Biennial," as FotoFocus does, when that is only justified so far by the fact that there was also a FotoFocus two years ago. The first FotoFocus in 2012 was the result of years of planning by Tom Schiff, one of Cincinnati's long-term leading proponents and supporters of art photography, and James Crump, who curated photography at the CAM, and was co-chaired by Raphaela Platow, the Director of the CAC. That version did not have centrally-curated shows—this year, Kevin Moore is curating no fewer than six, which he admits is "a little chaotic, and maybe a little crazy"—and did not have temporary venues for its shows or the Art Hub, a temporary pavilion in Washington Park that will serve as the headquarters for the event. Goeke explains that this year they hired a PR firm from New York called "Blue Medium" that has had extensive experience with a similar event, FotoFest in Houston: "They got FotoFocus right away and understood what we wanted to do." This is a very substantial amount of growth in two years, and by calling it a "biennial," it allows for the possibility of still more growth. Its planners admit that "biennial" may prove to be a stretch, but agreed that it beat calling it "another month-long celebration of photography."

Goeke explains that one of the things that makes FotoFocus different from other shows and festivals is that "our primary mission is educational." Moore sees a close linkage between the curatorial priorities of FotoFocus and the educational ones: "I like to make shows and I like to talk about art." There will be conversations going on in spaces specifically set aside to encourage conversation, like a lounge adjacent to one of the spaces where movie screenings will occur. As Moore says, it's important to encourage people to explore the "set of ideas that are coming out of the films" the audience will have seen.

Including films in the show—featuring, for example, the works by Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs already on view at the CAC plus continuous screenings at the Lightborne studio—is a sign of how broad an endeavor FotoFocus virtually has to be if it is going to represent a significant portion of all the activity that counts these days as photography. “Photography behaves in many different ways,” Moore notes and as a medium, “it’s always been a little bit messy.” Making an effort to include and recognize a range of all lens-based work puts the show in general agreement with what most aspiring and many practicing photographers already do. There has been a conscious effort to invite many people to play, including, Goeke notes, “artists who are not known as photographers who can exhibit here as photographers.” The sorts of work that can be experienced at FotoFocus candidly acknowledge the democratic nature of the medium. “Any audience for photography is a diverse audience,” Moore notes; “the beauty of these things is that they offer diversity.” The diversity will be especially palpable in the Fotogram portion of the event, where anyone can post Instagrams to a stream of images that can be seen at several locations.

But Fotogram@ArtHub will also include work by twenty guests Moore has specifically asked to contribute work, which fits with his sense of the value of pursuing “the high-low approach” to the art form; make use of the tremendous outpouring of vernacular energy to image-making, but always bear in mind that at some point, “it’s not just whatever you like. There’s got to be a consensus” about what sorts of photographs are great and stand out. Moore is, above all, a curator. He brings a connoisseur’s eye to the task, and as Goeke notes, that’s helped to shape this year’s featured artists and exhibits. “Kevin is very decisive about what’s significant. That’s been a great education for us. There are great photos and there are standards.” Cincinnati has seen his curatorial eye already in “Starburst: Color Photography in America 1970-80” which Moore worked on as part of the 2010-2011 exhibition season at the CAM. That show featured the pictures of such artists as William Eggleston, Steven Shore, Joel Meyerowitz, and Richard Misrach, along with other artists whose work was seen as part of the New Color Photography movement. Looking back, Moore noted at the time, “It is hard to imagine today that color photography was once controversial.” Moore advised and helped to develop the Traina Collection of photography that was exhibited at San Francisco’s de Young Museum in 2012. Helping assemble an important body of work with a serious and ambitious collector combines a scholar’s sense of what is most important with the thrill of the chase. “You might see a vintage print and know that this might be the last of its kind to be on the market. Or a contemporary gallery offers you a preview of a show and you have two days to choose, bearing in mind that an image can sell out by the time the show opens.”

One of the hallmarks of Moore’s curatorial style is his combining historic work with contemporary. “I’m very classically trained in the history of photography,” which helped him shape “Panopticum,” a 2014 show he curated at New York’s Robert Miller Gallery, which brought together some little-known, disturbing pictures taken by Herbert List in 1944 Vienna of wax surgical models with contemporary images related to the body. Some of that same sensibility has gone into his FotoFocus show “David Benjamin Sherry: Western Romance,” which brings together the brightly-colored but startlingly monochromatic work of the young, Los Angeles-based artist with classic 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century photographic explorations of what the American topography has looked like. In a timely coincidence, Sherry’s work is featured on the cover of the *New York Times* magazine section for this September 28. It is hard to imagine resisting the synergy of seeing Sherry’s cyan and white or orange and white landscapes next to the sepia or black and white pictures of Timothy O’Sullivan and Ansel Adams. “I’ve always been interested in historical, time-travel sorts of thing,” Moore said. “One of the reasons I love photography is its contradictions. Photography promises a lot of realism but is actually made up of fantasy,” including the basic situation of the grand American picturesque translated into what Sherry has called “chromatic extreme.”



David Benjamin Sherry Lower Yosemite Falls, Yosemite, California, 2013 Chromogenic photograph 52 x 40 inches Courtesy of the artist and salon 94, New York



David Benjamin Sherry Crown Of The Continent, Montana, 2011, 2012 Chromogenic photograph 40 x 50 inches Courtesy of the artist and salon 94, New York



Kevin Moore Photo by Wilson Reyes



Self-portrait, 1959 Gelatin silver print; printed 2013 Image size: 12 x 12 inches Paper size: 20 x 16 inches Photographer's collection stamp signed by John Maloof with date, print date, and edition number in ink on print verso.



Self-portrait, Chicago, July 27, 1971 Gelatin silver print; printed 2014 Image size: 12 x 12 inches Paper size: 20 x 16 inches Photographer's collection stamp signed by John Maloof with date, print date, and edition number in ink on print verso.



Self-portrait, Chicago, 1970 Gelatin silver print; printed 2014 Image size: 12 x 12 inches Paper size: 20 x 16 inches Photographer's collection stamp signed by John Maloof with date, print date, and edition number in ink on print verso.

One of FotoFocus's most exciting shows is surely going to be "Vivian Maier: A Quiet Pursuit," to be shown at a pop-up space at 1400 Elm Street, just north of Music Hall. Maier, who produced about 150,000 photographs, mostly of life on the streets in New York City and Chicago, made work that was virtually never seen during her lifetime while she was working as nanny in the 1950s and 1960s, using her bathroom as her darkroom. She lost control of her archive late in her life, and her work has only recently been salvaged and popularized by the people who bought and salvaged her negatives, chiefly John Maloof. The Cincinnati show, mostly featuring her self-portraits, will be "one of the first selective, curated shows of her materials," says Moore. What is the status of artwork that was never seen during an artist's life? Moore was asked if it was like the thousands of pictures taken by Gary Winogrand late in his career, which were not ever printed—and in some cases, not even developed—until after his death. The analogy Moore prefers is the work of Jacques Henri Lartigue—the subject of Moore's dissertation and first book—whose most important photographs were taken starting when he was still a child and then not exposed to the public until he was nearly seventy years old. Careers like Lartigue's and Maier's, Moore notes, make us change some of our usual measures of the greatness of a life's work, taking away, for example, the standard that greatness calls out to other greatness, and influences it. In these cases, observes Moore, "the artist isn't influencing in a typical kind of way." But the possibility of influence, of having impact in the field, begins when the work starts being seen, and "Vivian Maier will be influential now." It's examples like this, Moore concedes, "that make art history a very messy thing."

The excitement of photography should be eminently on view for the next month all over Cincinnati, attracting an audience as diverse as the work on display. One of the glories of photography, Moore believes, is that everyone does it (hence the Instagram show) and that everyone knows, more or less, how to look at it, since it "doesn't require you to be interested in the medium" in technical or historical terms. Just come to look, and the people who are helping bring FotoFocus to Cincinnati promise, as Goeke notes, to "keep it strong, serious, and engaging."

-Jonathan Kamholtz