

AEQAI

Public Art: Mural Month and FotoFocus

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October has been a month full of activities in the visual arts. FotoFocus, the biennial celebration of photography and lens-based art, is still in swing, and it brought an exceptionally high level of exhibitions, lectures, and other adjunct programming to Greater Cincinnati. Mayor Cranley also declared October to be Mural Month, in order to bring our attention to saving the original Union Terminal murals a second time. Because of the latter, AEQAI is focusing on both FotoFocus and Murals, as together, they constitute a new interest in public art. A movement has been afoot for about eight years to bring more art to the public, in the public, and out of museums (etc.) and other art venues. Think back to The CAC's Shepard Fairey exhibition as an example of a show where art was in the center, as well as all over the tri-state region on building walls, much like murals. A plethora of murals have been evolving under the tutelage of ArtWorks, this region's best advocate for public art within the context of urban planning. Tamara Harkavy, the founder and executive director of ArtWorks, has given us everything from the Pig Gig, to bicycle racks and benches, to public sculptures, and currently, murals most of which are in OTR, but many are all over, as the program began as a summer program for inner city children to have summer job opportunities, working with area artists to create murals all over Greater Cincinnati. Public art has its precedence in graffiti art, and "tagged" art, where neighborhood teenagers would spray paint anything from subway trains to expressway overpasses, water towers and other parts of urban living. Keith Haring, who became known as the first subway painter, took graffiti art out of the underground/underworld and brought it into art galleries (there is a long history of art forms such as fashion, coming from the lower reaches of society and going right to the top).

One of assistant curator of photography Brian Sholis' most engaging projects during FotoFocus was to place photographs on area billboards, so murals and parts of FotoFocus merged in the idea of public art, which I believe we will be seeing more of in the next few years. Add to these artistic phenomena such new events as LumenoCity, and older events like the WEBN fireworks, BalloonFest, and more experimental arts programming in Washington Park and on Fountain Square, and we can see a new sense of urban environments evolving as cohesive ways of bringing people together in neighborhoods with newer and evolving senses of identity. I expect that public art will start showing itself in East Walnut Hills and The Incline District of Price Hill. A merry-go-round called "The Carol Ann", named for the late Carol Haile, is being built by The Haile Foundation for Smalle Park.

We might say that the “P” in DAAP is in the ascendant; that last P stands for planning, a field that may have languished for a while, but is bursting forth as a new Cincinnati is emerging along with it. We already have a substantial number of public sculptures, but public art is a definite evolutionary step from the sculptures. Carl Solway Gallery began a project known as “Urban Walls” way back in the 70’s, where in sides of unattractive buildings were targeted for murals, and limited edition prints were made of the murals, as well. That project is the predecessor for what’s going on now, a kind of aestheticization of urban spaces. In large cities like New York, Los Angeles, and Miami, mural projects began to emerge on their own, created by at risk neighborhood youth, and the art world grabbed onto these murals and defined them as creating both personal and special identity in such marginal/marginalized neighborhoods. Some of the earlier murals in Cincinnati are also in inner city areas, and are as much about sociology as about aesthetics. We wonder whether this intense sense of neighborhood identity will continue or be lost as more murals are painted for aesthetic purposes and/or as part of urban planning, rather than specifically to define neighborhood identity. An argument can be made, for example, that the many murals in OTR help define it as an arts district, which I am not sure it is, but also as a hip place for young professionals to live and work, a more diffuse definition of neighborhood identity, but one that may prove equally valid. Time will tell.

The exhibitions selected for FotoFocus, which actually number under twenty, were nearly uniformly first rate, but the fact that just about every art venue had a photography or lens-based exhibition, may have confused the issue, rather than enhanced it. We hope that, in future, not every arts venue feels a need to have a photography show during FotoFocus. Many people have expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by the total number of photography exhibitions and programs, and I think that FotoFocus needs to be very clear about which shows it is sponsoring, and which it is not. Too many shows harms the underlying conceptual frameworks of FotoFocus, thus diffusing its intentions and its ability to manage its goals. Some of the finest adjunct programming occurred at Memorial Hall, between October 8th and the 14th, but students, in particular, often couldn’t get there at the times selected. We might suggest that the next FotoFocus consider some of the lectures to be held at area universities, open to the public, rather than the reverse. Students can then be assigned to come to specific lectures, or discussions, panel discussions, symposia and the like. Since FotoFocus’ primary mission is educational, I would think that this change in venue would enhance that important goal. We would also encourage a few more historical exhibitions, like the “Paris Night & Day” show at The Taft Museum of Art. Historical photography shows help put contemporary photography in an context that cannot help but aid in the educational mission of FotoFocus. The Art Museum’s “Eyes on the Street” has also been much praised as have several shows at The CAC. The attendance at the opening of the historical show at Hebrew Union College’s Skirball Museum was also impressive, and the photographs by Ransohoff, Rosen, and Rosenthal do a fine job of showing us some of the poorer sides of Cincinnati, where so many immigrants started their lives here. AEQAI writers haven’t heard many negative remarks about the shows, but nor have we heard much positive; what we mainly hear is how overwhelmed people were by the volume of material, which tends to make people stay away.

Since one of the main underlying hypotheses of FotoFocus is the democratization of the medium itself, and its increasing popularity among the general public, let me propose the show that wasn’t. One might have taken fifteen or so photographs from the Facebook pages of, say, twenty five people between eighteen and thirty, frame them, and create a show called “America as it Sees Itself”, or even “The New Narcissism”. It seems to me that the new popularity of the

camera is from cell phones and apps that people use unprofessionally, to communicate, to brag, to seem less lonely, and this part of the camera's new popularity seems to have been missed entirely, and I do not count the Instagram exhibition as part of this category, because the twenty people whose work starts the premise were pretty much selected by either FotoFocus itself, or by people who knew each other and were active parts of FotoFocus. It thus seems staged. Not every photograph taken is an aesthetic experience, and not all of them speak well of us as a people, and I think that aspect of photography was missed entirely, and needn't be. Let us remember that Zuckerberg founded Facebook because of his own isolation and inability to make friends while at Harvard, and that a Facebook friend is often a fake friend, helping to increase the artificial nature of life in America today, and its excessive materialist underpinnings.

These thoughts, I hope, will simply be thoughts for the next FotoFocus, which I hope receives more attention from the public which it so richly deserves.

-Daniel Brown



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