

# ARTFORUM

DIARY

## PICTURE PEOPLE

October 10, 2018 • Cincinnati • Zack Hatfield at FotoFocus Biennial 2018



Drew Klein and Teju Cole

A COLLECTOR OF FAMILY PORTRAITURE was telling me that these days nobody wants to prove Mark Twain right. “You *do* know the Twain quote, don’t you?” It was Sunday morning, and the nonchurchgoing milled about the Mercantile—Cincinnati’s toniest library—waiting for Teju Cole to begin a talk. The collector of family portraiture and I were discussing the city’s ascendancy as a cultural hub. I said yes (“Of course!”) but I had sort of forgotten. Later, I

Googled the full quote: “When the end of the world comes, I want to be in Cincinnati because it’s always twenty years behind the times.” Now as cataclysm barrels toward us from all angles, a two-decade grace period for history is sounding a little more like an asset. Still, I could see the man’s point. He handed me his card.

To me, things did seem a little out of time last weekend, when the Cincinnati elite descended upon the city’s historic Over-the-Rhine neighborhood for the opening of the fourth FotoFocus, a citywide photography biennial whose “Open Archive” theme, while risking open-endedness, allowed for a chance to revisit the vaults. The events had begun that Thursday night at a vernissage at the Taft Museum, where biennial director Mary Ellen Goeke saluted FotoFocus fans, donors, and clingers-on, and where a studious exhibition pairing Eugène Atget and Berenice Abbott (technical splendor) served as the subject for SFMOMA senior curator Clément Chéroux’s keynote slideshow (technical difficulties). Afterward, some of us retired to the 21c Museum Hotel, a Midwestern boutique chain whose downtown Cincinnati location abuts the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC). I acquainted myself with the new and strange feeling of staying at a hotel in what was once basically my backyard.



Sigrid Viis and Dennis Harringer

The next morning, camera cognoscenti swanned around the Weston Gallery, where a group show of local and nonlocal artists was kicking off. Sigrid Viir, an artist and quondam model who'd flown in from her native Estonia, told me about her installation, which involves sugar, Coca-Cola bottles, and stolen imagery. "Photography *can* change the world," she averred. I couldn't tell if this was praise or premonition. I also chatted with Cincinnati-born artist Sheida Soleimani, who shared a theory that the photographic lens is basically "just a big dick that penetrates the world."

Later that afternoon, gallerist Michael Lowe led an impromptu tour of his two-floor space in Over-the-Rhine with local connoisseur George Kurz, with whom he curated "A Kick in the Head: Uncouth Stories of Sunken Beauty," a trove that includes Catherine Opie, Nobuyoshi Araki, Larry Clark, and Mike Kelley— a bejeweled middle finger to those on the wrong (that is, the Right) side of the Mapplethorpe obscenity case that burdened the CAC in the 1990s. I posed the two collectors in front of *Joe, N.Y.C.*, 1978, which portrayed a fellow clad in a leather suit, studded collar, and strap-on tube, immortalized in partial genuflection. "You can hardly tell it's Michael in the photo!" said Kurz. When asked if either Lowe or Kurz had attended the twenty-fifth anniversary symposium and exhibition surrounding the 1990 controversy at the center, Kurz replied, crossing his arms: "Those big Mapplethorpes that hung on the wall in that show? Those were ours."



Michael Lowe and George Kurz

That night, curator Eva Respini and artist Akram Zaatari were in conversation at the CAC about his show upstairs. Zaatari likened his process of working with archives to keeping the TV on at all hours of the day, just waiting for something interesting to happen. He concluded the discussion by saying that he just really wanted to be a filmmaker. In a talk the next day, the Swedish artist Mamma Andersson, whose photograph-sourced, mostly unpeopled canvases wed a sullen Nordic palette with a sly comic-book vernacular, said, “I want to surprise myself. I’m working in a broad way of painting. But I always hope I’m going to be a filmmaker.”

That evening at Memorial Hall, after six hours of an enthusiastic if rather unurgent symposium, Teju Cole performed his photographic project *Blind Spot* with the Vijay Iyer Trio, which rattled off jazz improvisations— sometimes panicked, other times wispy, always splendid—over Cole’s orations as his photographs from around the world materialized on a screen behind them. The next day at the library, Cole spoke with CAC performing arts director Drew Klein about vision, trauma, and travel. “I have a problem with the pretend innocence of place,” he said at one point, and suggested that this city, its neighborhoods, probably has a lot it wants to say, a lot of invisible injustice. This sounded true, literally; one could hear the aesthetes fidget in their seats—as I had done when New York-based FotoFocus artistic director/curator Kevin Moore had the day before praised the recent “renovation” of the Over-the-Rhine (or OTR) neighborhood, now a sort of brand whose fraught legacy of gentrification is too often smoothed over. (“Is this the Williamsburgization of Cincinnati?” asked a fellow traveler from New York.)

The city itself is an archive, but FotoFocus didn’t fold Cincinnati’s specific histories or local artists into its major art institutions (the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Contemporary Arts Center, the Taft Museum). For this, turn to smaller venues like the Art Beyond Boundaries Gallery, which will be showing local street photography in Over-the-Rhine, and the University of Cincinnati’s Meyers Gallery, which will exhibit documentation of Lower West End buildings razed in 1959 as part of the Kenyon Barr project, which displaced more than twenty thousand predominantly black residents.

Sunday night, Miranda July and filmmaker Kelly Gallagher staged a talk at the Woodward Theater about July’s *Joanie 4 Jackie* film chain letter, which began in the 1990s and was featured at the Mini Microcinema. July said the subscription project—for which she accepted movies from all female submitters no matter what—sprung from her interest in “misusing systems as art.” During the Q&A, after a woman prefaced her question by thanking July for her willingness to make space for vulnerability in her work, there was a sprinkle of applause. Before answering the question, July noted the vulnerability of what had just occurred: “I just have to say: People clapping a little bit? That wasn’t happening. I’ve been sitting in front of audiences my whole life, and in that moment there would have been, like, an eerie silence or an ‘uh huh.’ A little clap of like, *Fuck yeah we know that’s important now?* We have to take it where we can.” Apt wisdom for a photography biennial: Seeing is just as crucial as feeling seen.

— Zack Hatfield





Miranda July and Kelly Gallagher



Kevin Moore



Mamma Andersson



Clémont Chéroux and Akram Zaatari





Sheida Soleimani and Maureen France



Lennell Myricks