

HYPERALLERGIC

Considering Photography's Past, Future, and Pitfalls

At a FotoFocus symposium, curators, panelists, and artists leapt into the fray of the medium's existential crisis, rather than just celebrating aesthetics or art history.

Sarah Rose Sharp [November 13, 2019](#)



[“747 West Court” \(2018\) by Nick Swartswell. Digital photograph, part of *AutoUpdate* for FotoFocus 2020 at The Carnegie. All images by the author for Hyperallergic.](#)

[CINCINNATI, Ohio](#)—When we look to the divisions underlying the tension in the United States these days, I submit that the most contentious excerpt from our founding documents is not the Second Amendment, but this snippet from the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident...” This year, FotoFocus’ symposium and first ever juried exhibition, *AutoUpdate: Photography in the Electronic Age* was dominated by questions less of art than of ethics, more of mechanisms than of process, and concerned with outcomes rather than intentions. And, as anything that traffics in coastal thought leadership (Cincinnati is a blue island in the belly of Trump country), it was subject to the same discussion of truth as self-evident that bogs down every major point of debate in the nation.

FotoFocus Artistic Director Kevin Moore opened the symposium with a 1990 video clip of a segment on the *Today Show*, which featured a demonstration of an up-and-coming web product called Adobe Photoshop, as well as one of its detractors, Fred Ritchin author of the then-newly-minted *In Our Own Image* (Aperture, 1990), the first book on the coming digital revolution in photography. In the segment, as most of the excitement centers on what we now *can* do, Ritchin seems to be the only one asking if we *should*. How prescient his concerns seem, nearly 30 years later, as the alteration of images and estrangement from critical understanding of sources has rent the fabric of our shared reality into tatters.



FotoFocus Artistic Director Kevin Moore (left) in conversation with Fred Ritchin, Dean Emeritus of the International Center of Photography, New York, in front of a doctored image of the New York City skyline.

The conversation with Ritchin followed the morning's panel, co-moderated by FotoFocus Deputy Director of Exhibitions and Programming Carissa Barnard, and Matt Distel, Exhibitions Director at The Carnegie, which gathered the curators of the *AutoUpdate* juried exhibition Alice Gray Stites, Museum Director and Chief Curator, 21c Museum Hotels; Jo-ey Tang, Director of Exhibitions, Beeler Gallery, Columbus College of Art & Design; and Michael Vetter, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, Newfields. This is the jury that curated the art exhibition at the Carnegie, which served as the physical anchor for the symposium's conversations about theory. Among the works on

view, artist Maggie Lawson's installation grappled with homecoming, blending fiber art, video performance, and 'zine distribution, all of which connected to her on-site performance that opened the weekend's programming. A concentration of digitally and otherwise manipulated photography and video also abounded — unsurprising, given the conceptual foundation of the festival this year — some of which pointed to photography as a medium for conveying emotional reality, while others undermined the capacity of photography to ever convey something which might be regarded as truthful. A small screening room ran a series of video works, providing respite from the symposium crowd.



The juror's panel, co-moderated by Matt Distel and Carissa Barnard (left), featuring Alice Gray-Stites (center), Jo-ey Tang, and Michael Vetter (right)

The jury's shop talk panel, "The Digital Museum," frankly analyzed and philosophized about some of the challenges faced in discussing, presenting, and maintaining digital art works. Though important, these questions of the logistics that follow innovation are perhaps the more mundane tip of the digital revolution, and certainly pale in comparison to the problem of trying to reverse-engineer ethics or standards onto, say, the tech industry or the internet. It's not that propaganda images or misinformation is a new invention; it's that the delivery mechanism has become so rapid and targeted, altering the nature of truth. In the pre-lunch panel, "Deepfake News," Dean Kissick, Writer and New York Editor of *Spike Art Magazine* sat down with panelists: Elisabeth Bik, PhD, Microbiome and Science Integrity Consultant; and Rob Horning, Editor. Bik has leveraged a kind of inborn talent for visual acuity into a kind of vigilante fact-checking, born out of her observation

that scientific studies sometimes presented falsified images in their data. She noted a sharp increase in the practice around 2003, when the Adobe Creative Suite became a more widespread toolkit within science laboratories.



Dean Kissik (left) in conversation with Elisabeth Bik and Rob Horning (right)

If Bik's revelation was unsettling, Horning's perspective seemed to be one of the only among the intellectual glitterati of the day to acknowledge the uncomfortable reality. At one point, he calmly stated, "Truth is a socially constructed thing." It doesn't really matter *what* the facts are anymore; all that matters is who can get the most people into the consensus boat of their reality.

These, again, are perhaps more sociological questions than artistic ones — artists have long asserted the right to poetic license, personal truth, and disruption of conventional understandings. This feels as though it might contain an ethical conflict in its own right, during times where the social construct has become so stratified. But FotoFocus did well to end the day on keynote speaker and MacArthur Genius Grant awardee Trevor Paglen, whose work investigates mass surveillance and data collection in an effort to see the historical moment we live in and imagine alternative futures.



Two works by Tiffany Pierce, "Selfie Stick" (2019) and "Femenine, Like" (2019), installation view

"I do a resource-based approach of art. I spend a lot of time researching things, and figuring out how to see," said Paglen, in a presentation of the work he did to locate "the internet."

"Let's look at images that try to display what "the internet" is. A hole with numbers? A planet with blue fireflies? In reality, the Internet is a bunch of fibers connecting all the continents. I tried to photograph these conjunctions of internet cables in various places around the world."



At the symposium opening night with Maggie Lawson, who grappled with public data, personal history, and housing crisis in a performance piece at The Carnegie.

In a day that left many feeling a bit gutted by what feel like irreconcilable rifts in perspective, Paglen closed the day with a strong, unifying, and grounding exploration of reality. But the larger problem is that knowledge of any complexity relies upon some degree of second-hand information, meaning sooner or later we have to believe something beyond what we can directly witness. Who and what we believe in therefore is a matter of faith and trust, not a matter of fact or evidence, as defenders of truth so deeply believe. Photography used to be an impartial mechanism — or at least, it was thought of as such — and now it has lost that sacrosanctity. In this symposium, FotoFocus leapt into the fray of real existential crisis, rather than just celebrating aesthetics or art history. We are left with a feeling of image as sieve—for what can be held anymore, when no evidence that can be presented cannot also be debunked, when we live in a time where technology has made it easy for anyone with certain skills to falsify reality? It is natural to cling to truths as self-evident, but as we face such an uncertain future together, it is the tendency least likely to serve a common purpose.

AutoUpdate: Photography in the Electronic Age continues through November 16 at *The Carnegie*, as part of the *FotoFocus* program.