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FotoFocus Questions The State Of Digital Imagery With AutoUpdate: Photography In The Electronic Age

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Artist Trevor Paglen gives the keynote address at the FotoFocus symposium AutoUpdate: Photography in ... [+] [JACOB DRABIK](#)

The state of photography is at a crux. When digital photography entered the picture in the late '90s, it suddenly became easier to manipulate an image with programs like Photoshop. With the click of a mouse, pimples could be erased, pounds of fat shaved off, and a person could appear that they were somewhere they were not. Fast-forward to 2019, and the situation is murkier than ever. Deep Fakes plague the internet, humiliating and entertaining individuals, and perhaps even manipulating the masses with their impact possibly swaying votes. Digital technology allows algorithms and artificial intelligence to heighten photographs as they are taken. This all leaves us to ask, *What is real and what isn't?*

FotoFocus, the Cincinnati-based non-profit organization that centers on photography and lensbased art, wanted to explore the galvanizing effects of the digital age on images, and how they're changing society, so it held an exhibition and symposium titled [AutoUpdate: Photography in the Electronic Age](#) from October 4 to October 6. "The intent of the symposium was to hold a thinktank, or update, on the impact of digital technologies on both art making and public media—both arenas where photography plays significant roles," said Kevin Moore, FotoFocus artistic director and curator. "And while photography (and lens-based art) was, as always, our nominal subject, the symposium provided a forum on technologies and their contribution to growing dystopianism around the world."

The symposium featured seven talks including Digital Evolution//Digital Revolution with Moore in conversation with Fred Richtin, an early critic of the photography's digital transformation, author of the book *In Our Own Image*, and the current dean emeritus of the International Center of Photography in New York; Deepfake News, moderated by *Spike Quarterly* editor Dean Kissick with Elisabeth Bik, a microbiome and science integrity consultant, and editor Rob Horning; and Documentary Filmmaking: Observing Outside the Lines, moderated by Toby Lee, artist, anthropologist, and assistant professor at NYU, with Jacqueline Goss, filmmaker and professor at Bard College, and Cristopher Harris, filmmaker and professor at the University of Iowa.



Kevin Moore and Fred Richtin (L-R) in the conversation Digital Evolution/Digital Revolution at the ... [+]JACOB DRABIK

During the discussion between Moore and Richtin, the author reminded the audience of a question he posed in his 1990 book *In Our Own Image*: "As a society, let's think about this," he told the audience. "Is the place we want to go or not, and what do we do about it?" Richtin highlighted the damaging effects of digital photography and the lack of responsibility.

"Michelle Obama, Scarlett Johansen, numerous women are being put in porn movies without their permission," said Richtin. "There's very little legal recourse, and unfortunately the big

companies like we saw with Photoshop, frankly don't give a damn in terms of what happens. It's not their job. They're just creating a platform. When I worked at the *New York Times*, if we did something incorrect, we'd get sued, I'd get fired. It wasn't just a platform. We took responsibility. I think responsibility is a good thing."

In the Deepfake News panel, Horning talked about the blurred line the imagery on social media presents. "Images in social media kind of straddle the line between being evidence of something that you're trying to represent—this is a real thing that is happening and you should know about, and expression, this is a thing that I care about this is a thing that I think should be true," he said, before going into the consequences of the [drunk Nancy Pelosi](#) deep fake video that made headlines earlier this year, saying that it was so rudimentary that its role wasn't to make people believe the California senator was actually drunk. "It's just supposed to confirm beliefs that are already held within a particular discourse community with a thing that seems documentary," he said. Artist Trevor Paglen gave the keynote address of the symposium, presenting his practice and the consequences of digital imagery. With digital imagery having a more powerful role in the way we see things, it is important to question and to criticize, and to call for more responsibility.

"These photographic practices are not only observing us, they're judging us, they're classifying us, and they're trying to sell things to us," he said. "And they're trying to sell us to other things, or pictures in a very real way. And so much of it is just stupid bullshit, at best. And a lot of it is horrible, racist, misogynistic, and cruel and harmful. And so my thinking about photography nowadays, we're not just thinking about pictures and talking about what they mean. We're looking at infrastructures are trying to see how enough practices built into those structures are making active interventions into our everyday lives. And we need to see many, many more people to look at these kinds of images. Look at these kinds of practices. Look at the apparatus."