

## IN THE FACE OF COVID-19, FOTOFOCUS SHARES THE WEALTH

Executive director Mary Ellen Goeke decided to cancel the 2020 biennial and donate \$800,000 of operational funds to more than 100 local arts groups.

[Eleanor Bishop](#) July 28, 2020

**T**he [FotoFocus Biennial](#) celebrates photography and other “lens-based” art every other October with art shows, speakers, and other programming across Greater Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky, Dayton, and even Columbus. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Executive Director Mary Ellen Goeke and her colleagues chose to cancel the 2020 biennial (and 10th anniversary celebration) and donate its \$800,000 operating budget to more than 100 arts organizations and venues that were scheduled to be involved, including the Art Academy of Cincinnati, ArtWorks, The Carnegie, Cincinnati Art Museum, Contemporary Arts Center, Kennedy Heights Arts Center, Taft Museum of Art, Visionaries + Voices, Wave Pool, and Weston Art Gallery.



*Figure 1 Illustration by Zachary Ghaderi*

### **When did it become clear that the 2020 FotoFocus Biennial could not take place as planned?**

On the second Tuesday in March, we held a film screening at Rhinegeist . . . and by about 10 days after, we realized that things were starting to look very difficult. We were hearing about event cancellations and people not traveling.

Certainly by mid-April we really felt like we had to make a decision—we were either going to spend the money that we had planned to, with a possibly compromised Biennial, or we could start a conversation with our team to see how we could support our partners and venues.

It became clear that it wasn't going to work out for us in terms of being able to confirm artists we'd planned to bring into Cincinnati and that their art projects were not going to be realized. But we wanted to let the arts community know that we'd like to have them back in two years [for the next Biennial] and be a part of this again.

**Besides your venues and partners, can FotoFocus also help support the artists who were going to have work in this year's Biennial?**

We're postponing several of those exhibitions, and will put them on in 2022. We have the artists' commitments, and we're planning to make an announcement in October that will include those projects. We're not going to be dormant during this time.

Rather than a cancellation, we would prefer this year be referred to as a "reconfiguration." We'll work behind the scenes and promote those artists and those venues continuing with projects they'd already planned for this fall, and then we'll have some special surprises along the way until we get to October, when we hope to announce plans for 2022.

**What are some of the specific challenges these arts partners are facing right now?**

Art museums and galleries obviously have had to shut their doors, so there are revenue losses—the cost of a ticket, for example, as well as the income from a restaurant or gift shop. There's also the initial decline in the stock market and what that means for some of these organizations' endowments. For some, I think it's going to lead to an economic problem in terms of keeping enough core staff to function.

I also think the pandemic changes the creative process. Curators work so closely with their staff to plan exhibitions years in advance, and to know that something you've worked on that long might have to be postponed or outright cancelled is

a very hard decision. I personally think this is a rough time, but it's very survivable. All of these intuitions have really good leaders, and their teams are thinking creatively.

**How has the pandemic affected what kind of art is being created right now?**

A lot of people and artists are exploring what science means to our own individual lives and how we've neglected the part that science plays. Now artists of all types of practices are seeing how important the scientific world is. It leaks so incredibly into what all of us are able to do and not do.

**What can individuals do to support arts organizations in their communities?**

I would strongly recommend families and individuals who can to become members of these visual arts organizations. The memberships fees at museums in our region are really relatively low compared to a lot of major cities, and I know it's not possible for everyone, but even a student rate—whatever you can afford—would be a great private, individual decision that says, *I know you're there, I hope you'll be there, and I want to come back.*