

# FOTOFOCUS: FOCUSING ON NOW

by Mary Casey-Sturk

As the COVID-19 crisis began to unfold locally in March, the community found its favorite museums and galleries shuttered. Artists found their livelihoods in jeopardy and their studios closed. Art students found their classes cancelled. Gallery owners wondered how they would represent artists and assist their clients.

FotoFocus was in the process of continuing to plan and schedule their 2020 Biennial that includes exhibits held at venues throughout the region and features numerous artists as well as events.

Founded in 2010, FotoFocus is a non-profit organization created to champion and celebrate photography. Their programs include symposiums, lectures and visiting artist series. Their last Biennial (2018) attracted 207,000 visitors, reflecting a tremendous amount of growth in their ten-year history with 60,000 attending the first Biennial.

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, FotoFocus made the difficult decision to cancel their 2020 Biennial and donate the funds for the Biennial to more than 100 participating partners and venues that already had been selected to present. They then decided to take action by awarding \$800,000 (+ 10 percent more, in honor of their 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary) in Emergency Art Grants.

In April, FotoFocus shared this information with the public: "After many discussions about how we should move forward with this year's FotoFocus Biennial, we kept coming back to the same conclusion — the best thing we can do to help the arts survive this crisis is reconfigure our grant-making. We are about to move into our second decade, and we need our commu-

nity with us. We hope this money will help our partners get by at the time they need it most," said Mary Ellen Goeke, FotoFocus executive director and Hyde Park resident.

HPL interviewed Goeke to discuss FotoFocus and the local arts scene. We asked her, can the community continue to support hard hit local artists and art venues (as they reopen)?

"Now is more important than ever to become a member of your local museum or arts venue. Buy the merchandise they offer online or in their gift shop, like limited edition prints, T-shirts, or books. To help local artists, reach out to them directly and find out what works they have available to buy, and if they're beyond your budget, see if they're able to sell prints," she said.

How has she spent her time during social distancing?

"We work remotely and have Zoom or GotoMeeting gatherings multiple times a week....We also read and view all the virtual tours available with many of the organizations that are our ongoing partners such as the Cincinnati Art Museum, the Contemporary Arts Center and the Taft Museum of Art."

On seeing art when you cannot travel, she shares, "Most of the art fairs such as Paris Photo/New York and Basel, Switzerland have been cancelled this year. We are working to stay in touch with our participating venues and supporting and promoting the lens-based projects that they are planning to present this fall."

Partners and venues received grants around the community and included academic institutions, large arts venues as well as smaller arts venues. The Contemporary



Photographer William Wegman meeting fans at the Cincinnati Art Museum following his lecture on April 19, 2019. (Photo: Mary Casey-Sturk)

Arts Center, Wave Pool, Weston Art Gallery, Art Academy of Cincinnati, Xavier University, Visionaries + Voices and the Baker Hunt Art and Cultural Center were just some of the many who benefited.

We also reached out to Karen Etling, executive director of the Baker Hunt Art and Cultural Center in Covington to discuss the grant's impact.

"We were very pleasantly surprised by the Emergency Art Grant. It was a very generous thought and will help us and assist the artists that we were going to feature in our FotoFocus events....We will share the grant with the artists that were going to exhibit at Baker Hunt. They had already been preparing for the exhibition, and this will help them cover costs," Etling shared.

"FotoFocus is a wonderful event, and we love being part of it. We absolutely understand with all the uncertainty why it was cancelled. Our goal is to have an event on campus to share the beautiful artwork of our partner photographers Alissa Ohashi and Ryan Hill as soon as it is feasible."

"Over these last few weeks at home, it has been incredible to see how our participating venues and partners have been using their FotoFocus Emergency Art Grant. We have been documenting their stories on our blog, *The Lens*, which you can read on our website, alongside essays and interviews by our Artistic Director and Curator Kevin Moore" said Goeke.

Stay tuned. When the Biennial returns in 2022, more than 100 venues will be participating throughout the Cincinnati region, and there will be large public art projects.

For more information, visit [fotofocus.org](http://fotofocus.org).

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