

How a pandemic forced FotoFocus festival to reimagine itself for 2020



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Mary Ellen Goeke, executive director of FotoFocus, pictured at the Weston Art Gallery. The photo in the background is by Emily Hanako Momohara, part of an exhibition entitled "Beacon."

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By [Janelle Gelfand](#) – Courier contributor

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The pandemic prevented FotoFocus from celebrating its 10th anniversary and fifth Biennial in grand style last month. But instead of canceling the unique festival of photography and lens-based art that has drawn artists and visitors from around the world, the organization reimaged itself.

"We didn't do our in-person Biennial Week, where we bring in artists, have discussions and in-person gallery tours, and so on," said executive director [Mary Ellen Goeke](#). "What we did do was reconfigure that in terms of the virtual world. A lot of fairs have had to cancel. But

we're in the position that we could reconfigure what we're doing and use our funding budget in that way."

In lieu of its 2020 Biennial, FotoFocus provided \$800,000 in emergency grants to more than 100 of the region's arts venues, academic institutions and artists. Several new photography projects were created across the city, and FotoFocus was able to support major exhibitions. Those include the just-closed "Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal" at Cincinnati Art Museum and "Marjolijn Dijkman: Earthing Discharge," a photo collage on view in the lobby of the Contemporary Arts Center through March 21, 2021.

In the past decade, FotoFocus has collaborated with artists and venues to present and provide funding for more than 700 exhibitions and programs. The organization has brought hundreds of internationally renowned photographers to Greater Cincinnati. *Courier* contributor Janelle Gelfand spoke last week with Goeke about her work and how FotoFocus is navigating the pandemic.

How is FotoFocus unique from other photography festivals? We fund and support exhibitions within the city that respond to the theme – this year, "light&" – and it's meant to be timely. We support that through funding, and we also create a few of our own exhibitions. What's fundamentally different is that many festivals are built around art sales, where galleries come into town and sell photography. Ours is meant to show and bring forward work from our region.



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Highlights of the 2012 FotoFocus Biennial included "Herb Ritts: L.A. Style."

FOTOFOCUS

When did you realize you would not be able to present the 2020 FotoFocus Biennial as planned? We knew by April that there were issues. One involved an artist based in Australia, and he could not travel. Part of his exhibition involved a site-specific installation, and a residency in Cincinnati through the summer. That was one of our own organized exhibitions, and we knew that wasn't going to be realized. Another was an exhibition called "Fireflies" at the CAC, that we'd partnered with. This was going to be coming from several continents with artists from around the world. For our Biennial Week, we rent venues and restaurants, we have events and lectures, and we get into spaces all around the city. It seemed more and more high risk to commit to that.

How have you reimagined FotoFocus for the virtual world? We have produced videos and have done online conversations and virtual exhibitions. We've enhanced our website, so that it's much easier to navigate. And we started a blog. We've solicited writers, and they've been writing on what's called "The Lens." We hired C. Jacqueline Wood as a curator for film. What she's provided for us is the opportunity to screen films and also keep alive important films that are coming out. So, across the board, we changed a lot of what we were doing.

What was your pathway to your current position? I was always interested in art. I was one of those people who attended art classes in grade school at Cincinnati Art Museum, going on Saturday mornings to the Art Museum, and having an Art Academy student teach you. When I was in high school, we went to see a minimalist exhibition by Robert Ryman. An educator at the CAC discussed the exhibition with us in such a way that I really got it. I decided to attend the Art Academy, and majored in painting and minored in sculpture, and I received the Elizabeth Nourse Scholarship in painting. What I loved about the Art Academy in those days, it was adjacent to the Art Museum, and we had our art history classes in the auditorium and we had access to the library.

I went on to UC graduate school and worked at the Contemporary Arts Center. That's where I met amazing artists such as Christo. It made me realize I liked the art museum experience. I moved on to the Art Museum as a registrar in 1984, and I worked on big projects involving museums from all over the country.

Was photography something you've always admired? I studied photography at the Art Academy. I'd been struck by how photography and contemporary art intersected in the latter part of the 20th century, but also earlier. I was always interested in how Alfred Barr, the infamous first director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, created the first department of photography in 1929.

I did a thesis on Alfred Barr and the Museum of Modern Art. Concurrently, (photographer) Alfred Stieglitz opened An American Place gallery, blocks away, because he wanted to show his stable of American artists. I was just interested in that whole period of American history as well as art history, and how things were established. Stieglitz brought photography to an important level of fine art in the states.

How did a photography festival for Cincinnati come about? It was the original idea of (Cincinnati photographer) Tom Schiff and James Crump, who was hired as the first dedicated curator of photography at the Art Museum in 2008. When James arrived, he and Tom Schiff discussed the idea of a photo fair or biennial. By 2010, FotoFocus was created

and received its nonprofit status. I was asked to direct it, to basically lead the biennial. It was all-hands-on-deck to create the first biennial, which was realized in 2012.

How has the festival evolved since 2012, when there were 50 venues and 60,000 visitors? We had more than 90 venues and more than 220,000 visitors in 2018. We were really looking forward to this year, with the planning we had done, thinking of the interesting exhibitions and significant artists we were bringing in. We thought we could get up to maybe 275,000. We have people from Tennessee, Chicago, Indianapolis, Cleveland, and other places who come down for the Biennial Week. Normally that is in October, and that would have included 25 or 30 artists and curators being brought in to speak about the themes and exhibitions.

What are your personal highlights of FotoFocus over the past 10 years? The first year, 2012, and seeing the success and the excitement was certainly terrific. We planned some outdoor events that were rained out. But every weekend, we had a very good representation of people coming to talks.

In 2014, Memorial Hall was our primary space. We had the Vivian Maier show, right at the time when her work was brought to the public's view... We had an exhibition by David Benjamin Sherry, an important landscape artist based in Los Angeles. We also had Jeffrey Rosenheim, a major curator of photography at the Met, who gave a great talk at Memorial Hall on Civil War photography. He recognized there was the encased wreath that had been on the train that moved Lincoln's casket through Cincinnati. People were so thrilled at that. And we had (American filmmaker) John Waters, who discussed his work in film and photography.

At the 2018 Biennial, we had a great event at the Taft Museum of Art. They presented a show curated by Kevin Moore, "Paris to New York: Photographs by Eugène Atget & Berenice Abbott." Clément Chéroux, (then-senior curator of photography at SFMOMA) came in and gave a keynote speech, and there was standing-room-only in the garden at the Taft.

What trends are you seeing today in photography? So many artists are going back and reviewing their work because they're isolated, they're not free to travel. So it's almost a period of review, and a reconsideration of their work, based on what's going on. I think there will be all sorts of new approaches to the themes. The year with Covid has brought so many things to a standstill and so many curators and artists have had to basically circumvent what they were planning to do.

What is your plan moving forward? We're going to go forward with a biennial in 2022. We're looking forward to as many venues coming back to us, so we can reach that 100-venue mark for 2022. We're still hoping to do a weekend symposium in October of 2021. Our last event was in March, when we presented a film at Rhinegeist Brewery. We hope to be able to continue that but have to see what's possible.

Mary Ellen Goeke

Title: Executive director, FotoFocus (since 2010)

Age: 64

Education: BFA, Art Academy of Cincinnati; postgraduate work, Bennington College and the University of Cincinnati; master's of arts, Richmond University, London

Residence: Hyde Park

Hometown: Covington

Career: Titles at Cincinnati Art Museum include assistant and associate registrar, registrar and head of exhibitions and registration. Also, registrar, American Federation of Arts, New York; positions at Wadsworth Atheneum; deputy director, Terra Museum of American Art and the Musée d'Art Américain, Giverny, France. Fine art consulting practice.

Coming up on Lens Mix, a monthly virtual conversation series:

3 p.m. Nov. 21: Join renowned photographer Mitch Epstein and writer and conservationist Terry Tempest Williams for an hour-long Zoom conversation moderated by FotoFocus artistic director and curator Kevin Moore.

6 p.m. Dec. 10: Photographer and filmmaker Laurie Simmons, known for her staged domestic scenes using dolls and miniature objects, is presented in conversation with *New Yorker* writer Naomi Fry.

Information: fotofocus.org