



Talking Photography

Rating FotoWeek/D.C.—Incredible!

The capital's first-ever photo fest was a huge success
by Frank Van Riper

© Judith Goodman

Name the biggest thing to happen to Washington in 2008 and you'd be hard-pressed not to say the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States. But if you were asked to name the biggest photographic event in Washington in 2008, my guess is that you'd have to say FotoWeek/D.C., the phenomenally successful and first-ever celebration of all things photographic that ran from November 15-22.

This week-long festival covered so many topics, included so many venues, explored so many different aspects of photography that it simply was impossible to ignore—not that anyone who ever toted a camera would have wanted to.

In one week, the city of Washington established itself as one of the centers of the photographic universe. And it plans to do it again later this year.

"FotoWeek/D.C. 2008 exceeded all expectations," declared Theo Adamstein, owner of Chrome Imaging in Georgetown and FotoWeek's founder and guiding force. "Over 20,000 people participated in more than 100 events throughout the city. The website had over 250,000 visitors; 7,000 entries were received for the photography contests. Pros, amateurs and children participated. FotoWeek Central in Georgetown had 10,000 visitors in eight days. The gala at National Geographic was sold out with 650 attendees. More than 60 galleries were sponsors of FotoWeek/D.C."

Adamstein continued: "Exhibitions, lectures, workshops, portfolio reviews were held throughout the region. Monumental projections, entitled 'Night Gallery D.C.,' were presented at eight locations, including the Newseum, and the Holocaust Memorial Museum."

And that doesn't even include the events at the Corcoran Gallery, book-signings all over town, including at foreign embassies, and the week-long buzz that came just from knowing that you were, however briefly, at photography's epicenter and could get a hit

of photo juice damn near every place you went:

Wasn't that Joyce Tenneson talking about her latest book at the Fraser Gallery in Bethesda?

And wasn't that the legendary Joseph Koudelka speaking about his life's work at the Katzen Arts Center?

And, be still my beating heart, could that be mega photojournalists David Burnett and John Ficara schmoozing with Frank Van Riper during a panel at American University? (Great, but who's Frank Van Riper?)

What were all those people (nearly 300 by my count) doing on

FotoWeek Wednesday drinking free prosecco and munching free food at the Italian embassy?

And wasn't that Magnum star Bruce Gilden talking about his long career during another packed event at American University?

Down at the Corcoran Gallery, I know it's no surprise to run into famed photography critic and author Andy Grundberg (he is, after all, photography chair of the Corcoran School of Art + Design), but can that really be him poring over the portfolio of a student just a few tables away

from Frank Van Riper doing the same thing? (Yeah, but who's this Van Riper guy?)

And, wait: talk about double headers—wasn't that David Burnett (again) and Eugene Richards looking back over their illustrious careers as photojournalist/documentarians at the Naval Heritage Center in downtown Washington?

And finally, at Politics & Prose, Washington's, if not the country's, best independent bookstore, wasn't that photographer and sculptor Judith Goodman lecturing a standing room crowd about *Serenissima: Venice in Winter*, her new book, done in collaboration with her husband, photographer and writer Frank Van Riper? (oh, *that* Van Riper.)

To be sure, the idea of FotoWeek/D.C. was not new. Anyone who ever has attended similar events in other cities in the United



© Graeme King

Husband and wife photographer/authors Frank Van Riper and Judith Goodman discuss their new book, Serenissima: Venice in Winter during FotoWeek lecture at DC's Politics & Prose bookstore.

States or, for that matter, ever has attended the grandmother of them all, Visa Pour L'Image in Perpignan, France, knows the general outlines of photography festivals: an amalgam of stars, wannabes, workshops, shows and lectures. Of course, the danger of events like these is that they become simply a way for the rest of us to bask in the reflected glory of photography's all-stars, hoping to glean maybe a kernel or two of wisdom from what they have to say during their often tightly controlled events.

But the vibe at FotoWeek/D.C., in my view anyway, was just the opposite. This was one of the most photographer-friendly, accessible events I ever have attended. By any measure, this baby was huge, but from the start, a conscious effort was made to create as welcoming an atmosphere as possible for any who attended, whether big-time pro, or just-starting-out student. I am proud to have been on the FotoWeek advisory board and to have been in on its early planning. I have to admit, in those very early days of 2008, as we sat and brainstormed on the second floor of Chrome while Theo passed around sodas, chips and a cheese tray, I was unsure just how we would implement the big ideas that Theo seemed to be generating at will.

But all I had to do was look around the table to realize that here was a group of motivated self-starters who had spent most of their professional lives making things happen. Almost literally at Theo's right hand was George Hemphill, whose Hemphill Fine Arts gallery is a high-end fixture in D.C. Right away George set to the task of lining up the D.C. gallery and arts community to provide those ever-critical commodities: venues and volunteers.

Professional photography organizations stepped up as well, most notably the American Society of Media Photographers (ASMP) in the person of D.C. chapter co-presidents Irene Owsley and Paul Fetters, and the American Society of Picture Professionals (ASPP) in the person of executive director Cathy Sachs and vice president Holly Marshall. These and other folks did the all-important early organizing to give FotoWeek a chance to reach its potential and to corral the kind of big league sponsors who could, via money or in-kind assistance, make FotoWeek happen. Example? FotoWeek's nerve center, FotoWeek Central, was housed in two empty storefronts on Georgetown's bustling M Street. Credit Theo and company with using their contacts in D.C.'s commercial real estate world to swing that deal and give FotoWeek not only a classy street address but a kick-ass exhibition space to boot..[To see a complete list of FotoWeek/D.C. sponsors, go to: www.fotoweekdc.org/sponsors/index.asp]

From my own perspective as photographer, author, teacher

and journalist, I wanted FotoWeek most of all to reach out to the next generation of shooters, and in this respect, the work of people like Barbara Tyroler of the University of Maryland, Muriel Hasbun of the Corcoran Gallery, Leena Jayaswal at American University—and the redoubtable Andy Grundberg—shone. Arguably for me the most rewarding time of FotoWeek were the hours I spent reviewing student and amateur portfolios at the Corcoran Gallery Saturday, November 15, followed four days later by the jam-packed seminar on the downsides of digital photojournalism that I led at American University (thanks again, Leena) with Dave Burnett, John Ficara and young photojournalist and my onetime student Bill Putnam.

The gala reception that the Italian Cultural Institute threw for Judy and me November 19, at the Italian Embassy to launch our Venice book (the free prosecco and munchies, remember?) was like going to the Oscars. For another drop-dead party, you'd have to go some to beat the great awards gala located at and hosted by National Geographic at FotoWeek's end, November 22. But it was the events at the Corcoran and American University that nourished the soul.



© Max Taylor
ASPP vice president Holly Marshall, second from left, joins photography colleagues Bill Deputy, Tom Wolff, Catherine Karnow and Paula Lerner at the FotoWeek closing gala at National Geographic headquarters in Washington.

Describing all of FotoWeek 2008, and giving all components a fair shake, probably is impossible, a task similar to that given the fabled collection of blind men asked to touch and then describe an elephant. There simply were too many events for one person to take in.

In some ways, you had to be there.

Or better, you should be there later this year when it all happens again—FotoWeek/D.C. 2009—bigger and better than ever. (Watch this space for more details.)

Frank Van Riper is a Washington-based photographer, journalist and author. He served for 20 years in the New York Daily News Washington Bureau as White House correspondent, national political correspondent and Washington bureau news editor, and was a 1979 Nieman Fellow at Harvard. Among others, he is the author of the biography Glenn: The Astronaut Who Would Be President, as well as the photography books Faces of the Eastern Shore and Down East Maine/ A World Apart. His book Talking Photography is a collection of his Washington Post and other photography writing over the past decade. His latest book (done in collaboration with his wife and partner Judith Goodman) is Serenissima: Venice in Winter. Van Riper's photography is in the permanent collections of the National Portrait Gallery and the National Museum of American Art in Washington, and the Portland Museum, Portland, Maine. He can be reached through his website www.GVRphoto.com

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