

Sheets, Hilarie M. “New Triennial Offers Artists the Canvas of Cleveland.” *The New York Times*. July 11, 2018.

## The New York Times



*Fred Bidwell and Michelle Grabner, two of the forces behind Front International, the New Cleveland Art Triennial. Credit Andrew Spear for The New York Times*

CLEVELAND — The art world loves to flock to exotic locales for shows and fairs. Will it come to Cleveland?

Fred Bidwell, a collector and philanthropist here, is betting it will, to the tune of \$5 million — his money and that of other donors. “We’re at the front line of a lot of the changes, conflict and currents in the air today,” he said. “Cleveland is a blue city surrounded by an ocean of red. Artists have really been interested in creating new art within this context.”

On July 14, “[Front International: Cleveland Triennial for Contemporary Art](#)” opens with work by more than 110 artists at 28 venues across Cleveland and in nearby Akron and Oberlin. Mr. Bidwell, who conceived and orchestrated the event, graduated from Oberlin College and ran an advertising agency in Akron before opening a museum for his photography collection in a renovated transformer station here in 2013.

The museum, *Transformer Station*, has been a catalyst for dynamic change in a once-seedy neighborhood on the West Side of Cleveland, and was one inspiration for the triennial. Mr. Bidwell was also motivated by his stint as interim director of the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2014. There he discovered firsthand the world-class collections of an institution that doesn't bring in nearly as many visitors as its coastal counterparts.



*The Transformer Station in Cleveland, a museum that houses Mr. Bidwell's photography collection and is one of the staging sites for the triennial. Credit...Andrew Spear for The New York Times*

Getting local audiences to buy into the triennial may be more important than luring the globe-trotters, some suggest. "The perception that this would become part of the city's future and regrowth I think is going to be a key to its success," said Timothy Rub, director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art and a former director of the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Michelle Grabner, Front's artistic director, said some artists needed a little convincing. "I know Cleveland's charms and I had to lay that out there," said Ms. Grabner, an artist, curator and native Midwesterner. She took artists on tours of the museums and less conventional sites for staging work, including the Cleveland Clinic. (She had collaborated on the list of artists with Jens Hoffmann, who stepped down in November as the other artistic director of the show, and then was terminated from the Jewish Museum in New York City after allegations of sexual harassment.)

The lavish lobby of the Federal Reserve Bank enticed Philip Vanderhyden, a New York City-based artist, to create a 24-channel video animation expressing his financial anxieties.

Investing in the underserved neighborhood of Glenville, Front leased and renovated two abandoned buildings as a public programming space and housing for visiting artists. Juan Capistrán, an artist based in Los Angeles, made a word installation on the window of the residence's storefront, which now houses a cafe run by local African-American entrepreneurs.

"I don't want to do an elitist international art fair that has no impact on the community," Mr. Bidwell said. "Front is really about redefining the city to the world and to itself."

Here is an overview of six Front artists, and where to find their projects.

### **Dawoud Bey**

#### **At St. John's Episcopal Church, Cleveland**



An installation view of photographs by Dawoud Bey at St. John's Episcopal Church. Credit... Andrew Spear for The New York Times

Mr. Bey, who is based in Chicago, is known for his documentary-style photographs of marginalized communities, which he likes to bring into the “white box” spaces of museums and galleries. He described St. John’s Episcopal Church as pushing him into new territory, in both content and presentation. The church was one of the last stops on the Underground Railroad where escaped slaves hid in the belfry awaiting the signal from boats to Canada, and it provided a departure point for the artist to reimagine the landscape from the perspective of fugitives moving through Ohio to Lake Erie. He shot his images, without figures, from deep in the woods and marshlands, close up near houses and through the opening in the brush to the lake, then printed them very darkly. The title, “Night Coming Tenderly, Black,” referencing a poem by Langston Hughes, “suggests that this darkness was not merely intimidating but also a tender cover of blackness through which one was moving towards freedom,” he said. The photographs are being suspended from wire cables between the pews.