

Lens on the future

FotoFest's Meeting Place offers a world of support to emerging photographers.

IT'S that time again, when FotoFest's yellow and black signs sprout all over town and beyond, designating dozens of venues — from museums and galleries to banks, hotels and retail establishments — that from now until April 20 are hosting one of the world's oldest and largest photography festivals.

Since its inception in 1986, the biennial has been a smashing success, garnering the world's attention and respect. FOTOFEST2008, focuses on China and provides a rare, comprehensive view of what is arguably the most complex society in the world — and one more milestone in FotoFest's continuing commitment to presenting the best, most original and socially significant of photographic art.

But FotoFest does much more than present images. It nurtures and encourages the artists who create them. Among its many educational and mentoring projects, none is more valuable or more highly regarded than its Meeting Place, a series of individual meetings between photographic artists and influential mentors and consultants, who not only critique and advise, but also can help secure gallery space, publication and other exposure.

Inspired by the informal and often chaotic gatherings at the venerable Arles photography festival in the 1970s, FotoFest founders Fred Baldwin and Wendy Watriss introduced the Meeting Place at their first FotoFest biennial.

In 1986, 20 reviewers were on hand.

This year, more than 140 reviewers have converged on Houston from London, Berlin, Shanghai, Brasilia and all over the world, all of them available to any photographic artist who signs up. (Even to some who don't. A spontaneous mini-Meeting Place often springs up outside the designated space, where unregistered artists might snag a reviewer for an impromptu critique.)

Chinese photographer Yao Lu, a first-time Meeting Place attendee whose work is included in the Current Perspectives exhibit, said, "This is so valuable for me, to be able to talk directly to people from galleries who show an interest in my work." Roy Flukinger, senior research curator of photography at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, has participated in every Meeting Place since 1986. "There is nothing else like it," he said. "This is the heart, the core of the communications aspect of photography."

"The ultimate purpose of the Meeting Place," Baldwin said, "is to make it possible for the artist/photographer to bring talent to possibility. That, in itself, fueled an enormous explosion of creative energy. Thousands of photographers have gotten their break at FotoFest, including now some very famous ones."

No wonder FotoFest thrives in Houston. It's a town that knows and appreciates energy. And the energy generated by the Meeting Place is the best kind: easily transported anywhere in the world, environmentally beneficial and renewable. It could last forever.

