



## For Contact, a Public spectacle unravels



Richard Mosse, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, 2011. Mosse shot the series using Kodak Aerochrome Infrared, a discontinued film developed for the US...

By Murray Whyte  
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Since it started up 16 years ago, the Contact Photography Festival has been something of a moving target. From its early years as a grassroots free-for-all — got some photos and somewhere to hang them? You're in the festival! — to its slow evolution to a more professional, curated affair that still respects those democratic roots, Contact has offered a

dizzying suite of content that, more often than not, exulted in its incoherent exuberance.

Part of that latter-day professionalization has been the crafting of a loose thematic frame, year on year, meant to give shape to the chaos. This year's is perhaps its loosest, "Public," and this impossibly broad rubric seems almost a return to the festival's days of everyone-in-the-pool inclusiveness.

If "Public" is different from simply public, then the vast majority of exhibitors haven't taken it in hand; dozens of Contact's 130-plus exhibitions are of the anything-you-please variety. If "Public" does anything for the general public, it's to make them feel covered under the largest thematic umbrella Contact has ever unfolded: a smartly inclusive gesture at the same time as a loose curatorial theme.

Contact means to make more of "Public," though. In its own words and at its central, curated exhibition, "Collective Identity/Occupied Spaces," it looks to explore how "photography has become a more crucial component for social change." Hard to argue with that. Tarek Abouamin's bluntly provocative grid of crowd-sourced photos of the Egyptian uprising in Tahrir Square last year embodies that idea better than anything else on display here.

It's one of the show's few on-point works. The notion, of a blurring line between public and private, and photography's primary role in driving this burgeoning indistinction, is a good one. But how loose is too loose? This year, the exhibition sprawls to the University of Toronto Art Centre, where Abouamin's work can be seen, from its perennial home at the Museum of Contemporary Art, on Queen St. W. Here, the breadth of theme seems to be, to put it simply, overindulged. At MOCCA, panoramic street scenes in New York and Los Angeles by American photographer Barry Frydender make a beguiling, if benign, literal translation of the theme, with the captivating mundanity of everyday urban life on display.

Other works are powerful, but puzzling here: Philippe Chancel's otherworldly images of North Korea's enforced choreographies of power celebrating late supreme leader Kim Jong Il are gorgeous, compelling confections, set against the blatant propaganda posturing they represent. Public? As a vetted spectacle of nationalistic posturing built for public consumption, sure; but Chancel's images are standoffishly dazzled. If they function as a "crucial component for social change," I can't see it.

MOCCA's portion of the show is notably unarresting. Its mandate to embrace loose street photography seems both uninflected and indiscriminant. Baudouin Mouanda's pictures of African street scenes aim to capture the banality of everyday urban life there, but they're too prosaic — snapshots, with a hurried laziness — to be an inquiry into their subject. Across the way, Michael Wolf's *Tokyo Compression Series* has a quick-hit grabbiness — he stood on subway platforms in the Japanese capital, snapping images of faces quite literally pressed against the glass in the famously overcrowded Tokyo transit system — but it's a visual one-liner and has little resonance beyond that.

"Public" in this digital era of Instagram, Facebook and every other instant tool of self-display (I'm sure there's been another venue launched since I wrote this; our own fascination with ourselves is money in the bank in this digital, everything-all-the-time moment) is a moving target. At MOCCA, Contact dips its toe into this rapidly evolving pool with Jon Rafman's images culled from Google Street View, of moments both extraordinary — the mysterious aftermath of unseen violence, for one — and the quietly sublime.

If you haven't seen or heard of "The New Aesthetic," a modest Tumblr blog with a grandiose name, you should: it's the future of "public" as we know it. Rafman's project, to deflect the growing churn of automated image-making with a humanizing eye, is an expression of The New Aesthetic in a tiny nutshell; its inclusion here positions Contact as presciently involved in a significant, rapidly evolving moment.

It's one of few revelations here, though. At UTAC, cleverly juxtaposed works riff, variedly, on the theme: Ai Weiwei's "Perspective Study" series, of the remarkable Chinese artist-activist registering his dissent with the global structures of power by flipping the bird to an array of officialized monuments of nationalist and cultural power — Tiananmen Square, the Eiffel Tower, the Mona Lisa and Manhattan's financial district, to name but a few — oozes a gleeful, anti-establishment liberation at the same time as it turns the idea of the typical tourist snapshot (self with Important Thing) inside out.

Equally clear-eyed is Benjamin Lowry's Iraq series, from 2007, in which he shot almost exclusively from the inside of an armoured vehicle. Lowry specifically frames each shot around the thick Plexiglas window that gave him his world's eye view. The extreme mediation of his experience as a documentary photographer — meant, tacitly, to convey the truth of a situation — undermines every notion we have of photography objectively bearing witness to history as it unfolds.

Finally, the UTAC portion gives over a substantial amount of wall space to the American photographer Richard Mosse. What his work has to do with ideas of "Public" I'd have to contort every which way to explain, but I'm happy to. Mosse's pictures here, of Congolese rainforests and denuded landscapes, are surely the most extraordinary thing to be seen at Contact this year. He shot them using Kodak's recently discontinued Aerochrome Infrared film, which was developed by the U.S. military to help it tell the difference between live jungle and camouflage in Vietnam from above.

Famously unstable, the film was hit or miss at best: a bugaboo for the military, but a blessing for an artist like Mosse, who has created some of the most staggering, haunting landscape photographs I've ever seen. A soldier skulks in a thick palm forest the colour of raw meat; a lush mountain scene is a swirl of pinks, greens and blues; a hilltop razed, presumably for grazing, is a ridged cone of neatly kept, flesh-toned grass.

Here's the stretch: Kodak Aerochrome Infrared seemed designed for nothing more than to ferret out the hidden, to make the private public. In Mosse's hands, the film's radical instability makes its nominal function a hazy, indeterminable thing; a better metaphor for "public," in these days of digital everywhere-ness, could hardly be found.

*Public: Collective Identity/Occupied Spaces continues at MOCCA to June 3 (952 Queen St. W., [www.mocca.ca](http://www.mocca.ca)), and at UTAC to June 30 (15 Kings College Circle, [www.utac.utoronto.ca](http://www.utac.utoronto.ca)).*