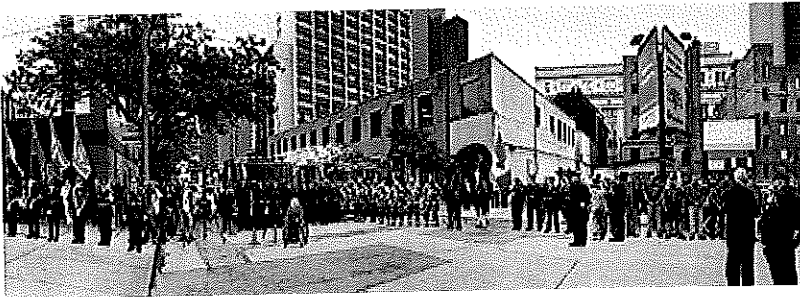




By Murray Whyte Visual arts

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Contact Photography Festival 2012 Preview



"Corner of the Courageous, Repatriation Ceremony for Sergeant Martin Goudreault, Grenville St., Toronto, Ontario, June 9th, 2010, 2012," by Scott McFarland. The...



Jon Rafman's Rv888, Finnmark, Norway. Raffman shows his images, culled from exhaustivelt poring over thousands of kilometres of roadway on Google Streetview, in...

Apr 26, 2012

The theme of this year's Contact Photography Festival — the 16th, for those keeping track — is, simply, "Public." Well, of course. For the past half-dozen or so years, Contact has grown up at the same time as it's merely grown, folding in ever-more pensive takes on its core medium that tilted mightily at photography's constantly-fracturing worldview.

The apex of this, as I recall, was the festival's embrace of Marshall McLuhan a couple of years ago, gamely layering the celebrated Canadian media soothsayer's ideas of photography as a manipulative, coercive force into the heady theme of "Pervasive Influence." The statement itself was a truism, but the complex lingo of McLuhanese, while nicely-represented at the festival's anchor exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, seemed to leave the 100-plus other Contact shows on offer in confused non-participation. If there was much of the McLuhan-esque vision outside the festival's core of official exhibitions, I didn't see it.

So now, maybe, a little corrective. Contact has ever been the democratic date on Toronto's interminable festival calendar — the Open Exhibitions program is just that, open to anyone with pictures to show and a wall to hang them, and the vast majority of shows, Primary, Featured or otherwise, are free — so the effort to bring it back down to earth is true to its roots.

"Public?" Works for me, and, I suspect, just about everyone else. Broad enough to let curators dress the bones with the meat of their own liking, friendly enough for the Sunday snapper to feel like he or she's up with the program, and ambiguous enough for the hordes of happy wanderers that frequent the dozens of venues each year to feel like they found what they're looking for, whatever that may be.

While Contact has never imposed its curatorial frame on its hundreds of participants — it's always been posed as a big-tent proposition, not a directive, in a sincere effort to bring some scant cohesion to what's typically a gloriously incoherent free-for-all — "Public" nonetheless has its specifics.

Artistic director Bonnie Rubinstein writes that the theme draws from a perceived global upsurge in street photography, and how the immediacy of captured moments, thanks to social technologies like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are able to travel the globe in a heartbeat. More importantly, she says, is how these instant image enablers blur the line between private and, well Public. How can you argue with that?

What follows is a tiny sampling of Contact fare opening in the coming week as the festival kicks off with an opening-night party at MOCCA on Friday.

1. Collective Identity/Occupied Spaces, at MOCCA, 952 Queen Street W. and the University of Toronto Art Centre, 15 King's College Circle

Contact's anchor exhibition always seems ready to burst even the very-generous seams of MOCCA, and this year it's spilled out. Taking in both the museum and UTAC, the show plucks images of gleeful dissent — Ai Wei Wei's impolitic bird-flipping to monuments of power worldwide — to simple observational takes on new ways of seeing — Montreal-based Jon Rafman's project culls images of public space from Google Street View — to question what constitutes public — in name, gesture, or otherwise — in a world where images flow in bytes at lightspeed, everywhere and anywhere at once. Opens Friday, April 27 at 7 p.m.

2. Afghanistan: Larry Towell and Donovan Wylie, Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Bloor Street West

Celebrated Canadian Magnum photographer Larry Towell has never pretended to be objective, and in this show of his work, Towell's unabashedly intimate, street-level views of a dispossessed people sit in sharp contrast to Wylie's obliquely menacing landscapes of military watchtowers perched high on mountaintops high above the dusty Afghan plains. Two distinctly different views of the same desperate circumstance. Opens May 4, 6 PM.

3. Sleeping Soldiers, Tim Hetherington. On billboards on Lansdowne Ave at College Street and Dundas Street, and across Canada.

Every year at Contact time, a small handful of billboards cede their sales pitches for jarring interventions in the urbanscape, and this year might be its most blunt. Pictures by Tim Hetherington, the photojournalist who was killed in Libya last year, capture American soldiers in unconscious exhaustion, between patrols, battles or God knows what else. Hetherington shot the images while making *Restrepo*, with Sebastian Junger, which went on to garner an Oscar nomination for best documentary feature.

4. "No Permanent Address," Mark Boulos at Gallery TPW, 56 Ossington Ave.

"No Permanent Address" is a bit of a double-dip for TPW, having also been presented as part of the just-finished Images Festival, but it would have been a crime to shut it down after only 10 days, so we'll overlook the fact it's a video in a photography festival and get to the meat of things: Boulos' engagement with capitalist end-of-days scenarios have resulted in provocative works, most recently "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air," a blunt juxtaposition of two videos played simultaneously, one of the trading floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, the other loose footage of a group of masked guerillas attacking international oil conglomerates in the Niger delta. "No Permanent Address" is less urgent, perhaps, of a theme, as Boulos camps out with a cadre of Maoist guerillas in the Philippines with similar dreams of emancipation. Already open, to May 26.

5. The Nine Eyes of Google Street View, Jon Rafman, Angell Gallery, 12 Ossington Ave.

I know he's already been mentioned in the big hoo-ha at MOCCA/UTAC, but there's something inexplicably entrancing about an artist who has pored over thousands and thousands of kilometres of fractured Google Streetview footage — his images stretch from Norway to South Africa to Mexico and everywhere else — culling the extraordinary from endless visions of deliberately utilitarian banality. A caribou trots down the highway in Norway; a man lies in the street, tended to by police, in Mexico City; children in school uniforms mob the Google vehicle as it rolls by. It's the planet, in passing — a perfect metaphor for contemporary notions of "public" if there ever was one. Opening May 3 at 6