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20th anniversary of Toronto photography festival a special time to salute the steps that helped event grow.

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Contact executive director Darcy Killeen won't get nostalgic as the festival turns 20. "Screw it," he says. "We're moving forward, not back."

By: [Murray Whyte](#) Visual arts, Published on Mon Apr 25 2016

Twenty years is an awfully long time in the art world, particularly so for a festival that started as a grassroots, shoestring affair held together with equal parts happy thoughts and general goodwill.

So this week, with the big 2-0 fast approaching on the calendar, the [Scotiabank Contact Photography Festival](#) could be forgiven a little bit of rosy retrospection. Talk to Darcy Killeen, the festival's executive director, though, and you'll find a different kind of take.

"We talked about it — do we do look back, acknowledge our past in some way?" said Killeen recently. "But we decided pretty quickly: Screw it. The only way we're going is forward."

Contact, of course, has always moved forward, sometimes in fits and starts, occasionally with lurches, but always out of necessity. It has always been a grassroots affair, relying on public participation to feed its fire. But it's a reliable source of fuel.

In 1997, when the first contact festival showed up on the good graces of a \$20,000 donation and a ton of sweat equity from local dealers Stephen Bulger, Judith Tatar, Darren Alexander and Linda Book, there were 56 exhibitions spread out between galleries, cafés, bars, laundromats and anywhere else its grab bag of (mostly) amateur enthusiast exhibitors could find a wall on which to hang pictures.

For years, the art world gave the festival little to no respect. If they didn't say it outright,

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most museums’ polite self-exclusion from the festival spoke volumes about their implicit concern: That their participation with so public-friendly an affair might sully their above-it-all authority.

But my, how times change. As museums scramble to find ways to be more audience-friendly in the swirl of an instant-information era that has eroded just that authority, what Contact has is what everyone suddenly wants: a natural, seamless connection to the people it serves.

“Ultimately, Contact has become a vehicle to drive people through the door,” Killeen says. “We have a million visitors a year. That’s an asset, don’t you think?”

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There’s little argument about that.

This year, every major museum in the city is hosting Contact shows: International superstar Thomas Ruff at the Art Gallery of Ontario, a public installation of Kalinga women at the ROM by Jake Versoza, a colossal photo-mural by Aude Moreau at the Power Plant, a cross-section of Toronto collections at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

At only a year old, the Aga Khan Museum, the new kid on Toronto’s institutional block, came to Contact without any of that old baggage. It made its own participation a no-brainer (it is showing an exhibition of photographs of Istanbul). Toronto’s big, photo-hungry audience exists “largely because of the contributions this important festival has made over the years,” said Linda Milrod, the Aga Khan Museum’s head of exhibitions and collections. “I hope the Aga Khan Museum and Contact will still be working together when the museum is 20 years old.”

This year, the festival counts 20 primary exhibitions, many of them at museums, all of them museum-worthy, many of them with international star power. Edward Burtynsky, our local photo star, is a long-time board member, whose personal global pull helps put superstar artists like Alec Soth this year — a friend — on walls where we can see them every year.

But breaking through to the museums took, initially, a flyer: in 2005, Bonnie Rubenstein, the festival’s curatorial director, had been developing a thematic voice for Contact alongside the annual chaos of its open appeal, and needed some solid ground.

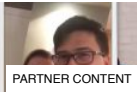


She went to David Liss, artistic director of the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, and convinced him to take Contact under the museum’s wing. It was a natural partnership, Liss recalls.

“Neither Contact nor MOCCA were what you’d call established institutions at the time,” Liss said. “And there wasn’t anybody in the art world here interested in getting involved.”


A lack of collaboration between institutions here generally had struck Liss, who had come from Montreal a few years before, and he wanted to help change that. Contact became that opportunity.


“(Contact) had started doing strong exhibitions and, for me, that’s where it always starts,” Liss said. “It just seemed to have a lot of potential.”

In 2006, MOCCA opened *Imaging a Shattered Earth*, the first of Contact’s primary exhibitions, which the pair co-produced together; MOCCA became the home of the



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festival’s anchor exhibition — thoughtful, curated, often with star power — for the next decade (MOCCA, homeless until its new building it ready next year, is sitting this one out).

They were a good fit: a populist festival long on audience support but trying to build art world cred coupled with a bona fide museum in tune with the local community and bursting with a convivial informality. Teamed up, they produced fireworks, at least on opening night. Thousands would crowd MOCCA’s Queen St. digs until the wee hours. (This year, the AGO plays host; “but the bar closes at 11 p.m., so it’ll be a different kind of thing,” Killeen laughs.)

After years of co-opting private galleries for exhibitions — not to mention those same cafés, bars, laundromats and, in one memorable case, a streetcar — it was the legitimizing turn Contact needed.

“We had no space to do anything,” Killeen says. “MOCCA gave us a home, and a place to grow.”

As it’s grown — into the largest photography festival in the world, it turns out — it hasn’t forgotten its roots. That open appeal is still there and so are the cafés and bars (a quick scan of the program reveals no laundromats, but there’s always next year.) And that’s not set to change any time soon.

“We used to have curators come to town and they’d say, ‘Take your exhibition list and rip it in half, and you’d have a great festival,’” says Killeen about Contact’s devotion to its broad constituency. “And we say, ‘No. Contact was built by the audience and by the public. And that’s who we serve.’”

*Contact’s 20th anniversary festival launch party at the Art Gallery of Ontario takes place Wednesday, April 27 at 7 p.m.*

**Top billing: A half-dozen really big shows at Contact this year.**

Contact is big — 200 shows and events this year, plus a few. It’s always big, and getting bigger every year — testament to its inclusive, everybody-in-the-pool mandate. It can make it a bit of a challenge to navigate, though, so herewith, a map to a handful of highlights.

1.[Thomas Ruff, Object Relations at the Art Gallery of Ontario](#): Ruff — who, among the world’s big dogs of photography-as-art, is perhaps the biggest — brings together five separate series of found negatives and images that the artist has photographed or worked over in myriad ways, destabilizing both the image itself and the idea of a photo as a frozen moment of something real. Opening Wednesday, April 27 at 7 p.m., 317 Dundas W.



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER

Negative artist Thomas Ruff presents Object Relations at the Art Gallery of Ontario from April 28 to July 31.

2.[Alex Soth, Hypnagogia, Arsenal Toronto](#): The title of Soth’s show refers to a liminal state, somewhere between awake and asleep, a semi-conscious zone that links well to images that Soth, a widely-celebrated U.S.-based photographer, tends to create. Soth’s

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inclination towards the ragged margins, whether of cities or societies, is less observational than poetic — less an attempt to capture the world framed by his lens than the circumstances that brought it to be. Opens May 5, 6 p.m., 45 Ernest Ave.

3. [Counterpoints: Photography Through the Lens of Toronto Collections at the Art Museum \(University of Toronto\)](#): More than 100 pictures from 20 private collections here in our hometown give a sense of Torontonians' predilections in the amassing of this, the most ubiquitous of media, than it does the lack thereof. The breadth of work here, from contemporary to historic to documentary to conceptual to somewhere in-between speaks to both photography's limitless potential as a means of expression, and one that endures. Opens May 6, Hart House and Trinity College, U of T. Opening reception May 12 at 7 p.m.

4. [Rodney Graham: Jack of All Trades at Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art](#). Graham, one of that crew of Vancouver "photo-conceptualists," as the coin became termed is definitely the one with the best sense of humour, and his hand-dog self-portrayals here mirror both his early work, with their sense of comic futility, and later, as the artist turns his absurdist eye to such things as the making of art, labour, value and, now pushing 60, the aging self's reconciliation of these things. Opens May 12 at 7 p.m., 401 Richmond St., suite 124.



SUPPLIED PHOTO

Rodney Graham's Jack of All Trades exhibition will be at the Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art from May 12 to July 30.

5. [Public Exposures: The Art-Activism of Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge, multiple venues at 401 Richmond St.](#) It's about time Carol Conde and Karl Beveridge got a museum-scale retrospective here in their hometown — even if it's not in a museum, but spread across a half-dozen artist-run centres in the socially-progressive 401 Richmond complex. Maybe it's more apt. For decades, the duo has railed against officialized institutional art, opting instead to be fiery, political and unambiguously on the side of the little guy (or girl) in their art — worker, immigrant and anyone else ground up in the society's gears. It hasn't won them a ton of friends among the elite — hence, perhaps, the lack of institutional support? — but ask a labour union organizer and you'll know who their audience is. They're legends. Opening May 14 at A Space, Prefix ICA, Urbanspace Gallery, Trinity Square Video and YYY Artists Outlet, 401 Richmond Street.





SUPPLIED PHOTO

Carole Conde and Karl Beveridge as they appeared on the front of their 1975 artists' book "It's Still Privileged Art." The pair are having a survey show across multiple venues for Contact this year.

6.Scotiabank Photography Award: Angela Grauerholz, Ryerson Image Centre.  
Grauerolz, who pocketed \$50,000 as the SPA winner, gets the solo survey show at RIC that comes along with it, and it's well deserved. The Montreal-based artist has made a career of images both haunting and intimate, filled with the quiet tension that comes with the wrestle of reconciling those two poles. Opening May 4, 6 p.m., 33 Gould St.



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The words of Angela Grauerholz will be on display at the Ryerson Image Centre from May 4 to Aug. 21.

– Murray Whyte

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Dating diaries

Kerry and Alexander

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