

Public: Big Ambitions

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As one of the primary exhibitions for the 2012 [Contact Photography Festival](#), “[Public: Collective Identity | Occupied Spaces](#)” is an ambitious offering. Featuring an impressive list of 16 Canadian and international artists, the exhibition is divided between its two co-presenting venues: the [Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art](#) and the [University of Toronto Art Centre](#). In many ways, this partitioning of the show mirrors the fractured reality of our contemporary existence: public and private, visible and invisible, place and non-place.

At MOCCA, the works seem to take on the collective identity concerns of the show’s title, examining in-betweenness, transitional spaces and the ever-shifting public sphere. From the series [Arirang](#) (2006), [Philippe Chancel](#)’s C-prints document the eerie control with which North Korea directs its performer-citizens in its annual mass games in Pyongyang. Like cogs in a well-oiled machine, dancers and gymnasts on the stadium field form flawless patterns; additional performers in the stands hold up cards to create giant

mosaic-like backdrops. Collectively, the citizens salute the plight of the worker, kitschy cartoons of children, world peace and the “Great Leader” Kim Il-sung. These hyperreal and colour-saturated prints gleam with perfection. Is it blasphemous to say that this propaganda is beautiful?



Baudouin Mouanda From the series *La Sapologie* 2008
Courtesy the artist

The works in [Baudouin Mouanda's](#) series *La Sapologie* (2008) capture the brightly suited members of *Le Sape*, or *La Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes* (Society of Tastemakers and Elegant People), as they strut and preen like peacocks around the streets of Brazzaville, Congo. In these photographs, past and present collide; the gentlemen's flamboyant and public sartorial display recalls the fashionable 19th-century Parisian pastime of strolling in the Tuileries Gardens, hearkening back to one of Congo's colonial forebears. On the less material side of things, Mouanda's series *Sur le Trottoir du Savoir* (2011) poetically examines the life of night where the scant availability of electricity has turned reading and studying into a public activity. Like an open-air library, public space is transformed: a man sits on his moped, doing what looks to be homework, while others sit on the grass next to a roadway, reading separately, yet together.



Ariella Azoulay From *Unshowable Photographs // Different Ways Not to Say Deportation* 2010 Courtesy the artist

Where the MOCCA portion of the exhibition investigates the new public sphere, the works at UTAC address the role of photography in terms of occupied spaces and global socio-political struggle. As records of change, photographs can themselves incite conflict. Such is the case with [Ariella Azoulay's](#) drawing-text pieces from *Unshowable Photographs // Different Ways Not to Say Deportation* (2010). Azoulay plays the role of political agitator, challenging the supposed neutrality of photography. She examines Red Cross photographs taken of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between 1947 and 1950 with captions that describe the forced evacuations of Arabs as "population transfer" and "repatriation," instead of "deportation." Because of Azoulay's insistence on using the non-neutral term "deportation," the International Committee of the Red Cross prevented her from showing the archival images publicly. Azoulay raises polemical questions and subverts the ban by drawing representations of the photographs, showing them with their original French captions, and alongside her own description of the events. As this work contends, a photograph can never be neutral.



Sanaz Mazinani *Amsterdam/Sidi Bouzid* from the series *Conference of the Birds* 2011 Courtesy the artist and Stephen Bulger Gallery

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Obfuscation is key in [Sanaz Mazinani's](#) series *Conference of the Birds* (2011), which takes its title from a Persian poem of the same name and serves as an allegory for current social and political strife. Mazinani's photographs are visually arresting, and bring to mind Islamic textiles and ornamentation. What appear to be purely abstract and jewel-like kaleidoscopic arrangements of shapes from afar are in fact tiny media-sourced images of Occupy marches in Toronto, Amsterdam and Rome juxtaposed with protests from the Arab Spring in Cairo, Sidi Bouzid and Tripoli. Fires burn, fists are raised, protesters resist. If we do not look closely, we miss the point. In viewing works such as these, we are reminded of the depth of both our actions and inactions. Without struggle, there is no revolutionary change.