

# WHEN BIGGER REALLY IS BETTER CONTACT PHOTOGRAPHY FESTIVAL'S 20<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

**For the world's largest photography festival**—Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival, which takes place every year in Toronto—celebrating 20 years means staying committed to community and diversity.

A decade ago, Darcy Killeen stood on the platform of the St. Patrick subway station in Toronto. Larger-than-life portraits of apes shot by James Mollison replaced all of the usual advertisements. Commuters smiled when they came face to face with the expressive gaze of one of our furrer cousins. Friends would ask one another to pick a favourite. And, the ex-financier who had recently been named the Executive Director of the CONTACT Photography Festival, responsible for this public art display, was soaking it all in. Transforming space and the residents' daily visual experience, was—and remains—the heart of the annual happening, which takes over the city every May. “I wanted to understand how people interacted with the work and, by the same token, grasp the importance of the festival, which was then, already in its tenth year,” explains Killeen, reflecting back on CONTACT's earlier years while considering its upcoming 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

When Stephen Bulger, owner of the Stephen Bulger Gallery

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in Toronto, organized the first edition of CONTACT in 1997, photography was still vastly underrated. Wanting to see the medium's popularity grow, he put a call out, asking his peers and others to program photo shows for the beginning of spring. People from all walks of life were welcome, from art students to established artists, from first-timers experimenting with the settings on their cameras to gear heads, from wildlife photographers to conceptual thinkers. That first year, fifty venues answered his call, covering the whole gamut of what still images could be. Since then the number of exhibitions has grown exponentially, and the festival staff, with Bonnie Rubinstein as Artistic Director, has gone from community organizers to curators. Initially, propelled by the desire to reach as many people as possible but lacking funds and space, they experimented in the streets. The innovative outdoor programming won them the recognition of the city's cultural institutions, which began partnering with them. This led to establishing three

categories of shows: Primary (large exhibitions created in partnership with CONTACT), Featured (a selection of shows culled from commercial gallery submissions), and Open (a non-juried program open to all).

The diversity, breadth and scope of the programming set CONTACT apart, making it arguably the largest photo festival in the world. Last year, it boasted 175 shows and over 1500 artists. “Most gatherings of the sort like the Rencontres d'Arles in France or Le Mois de la Photo in Montreal are heavily curated. In fact, photographers from Montreal come to us to have their first shows because there's no room for them in their hometown,” remarks Killeen. “Some guests suggested we get rid of the Open exhibitions because they felt it was not up to par with the calibre of the rest, but that would defeat our purpose, which is to celebrate the democratic nature of the medium and create a vehicle for all to get exposure.”



ANGELA GRAUERHOLZ, *JUDITH*, 1984-85. FROM THE SERIES *PORTRAITS*. GELATIN SILVER PRINT. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA



GARRY WINOGRAND, LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA 1969 / PRINTED NO LATER THAN 1974, GELATIN SILVER PRINT, 8-1/2 X 13 INCHES  
© ESTATE OF GARRY WINOGRAND, COURTESY FRAENKEL GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO 2015

Yet, given the number of exhibitors, the up-and-coming artists who pay \$400 to be part of the program may have a hard time distinguishing themselves, especially when pitted against big names such as Edward Burtynsky or Sebastião Salgado—his series *Genesis* opened in London and Toronto at the same time in 2012, a major coup for CONTACT. That said, the presence of acclaimed image-makers drives an audience. “We have a million visitors per year. Each, on average, sees seven shows,” claims Killeen. “Though navigating the festival is difficult and seeing everything nearly impossible, you can still find the

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hidden gem, either by chance, or by doing their homework and going through the catalogue ahead of time.” For instance, during the 2015 edition, Blake Morrow’s *The Beth Project*—on display at Vistek, a photo-equipment store—went viral in Canada and abroad.

For its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival wants to look ahead rather than behind. The programming only highlights the achievements of the past by building on the community spirit and diversity that have helped shape the festival. The outdoor presence

is bigger than ever, with twenty installations, from #Dysturb’s fly-posting to a makeover of the St. Patrick subway station with the images taken at Casa Susanna, a weekend getaway for American transvestites in the 1950s. The Art Gallery of Ontario is hosting the kick off for the first time, and *The Globe and Mail* is transforming its defunct printing press into an exhibition space. Christian Patterson, Rodney Graham, James Barnor and Thomas Ruff—to name but a few—are among the celebrated artists on view. Hundreds more from all walks of life will join them, making this a party not to be missed. ■