



**the  
global  
city,  
disclosed**

ROBERT FULFORD

A contemporary city such as Toronto breeds new forms of life constantly... Nothing disappears; everything that exists just mutates.

— SHIRLEY MADILL, CONTACT MAGAZINE, 2003

TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: JAMEL SHABAZZ, LYNNE COHEN, MATEI GLASS, OLIVO BARBIERI, STEVEN EVANS, ROBERT POLIDORI, J.D.'OKHAI OJEIKERE, JAMES MOLLISON, ANASTASIA KHOROSHILLOVA, MORAD BOUCHAKOUR, STAN DOUGLAS, STEPHEN GILL, GILBERTO PRIODE, MARCO BOHR, JOHN GANIS, TANIA KITCHELL, STEPHEN WADDELL, EDWARD BURTYNSKY, XING DANWEN.

For many of us, the CONTACT Photography Festival's first decade has changed Toronto and has changed the audience for photography in the city. We always knew photography was a good way to discover the world. But when CONTACT established itself in 1997 as a signature event of the Toronto springtime, it taught us something else: By the ingenious and enthusiastic ways in which CONTACT presents photography, it showed us how to discover works of art and simultaneously rediscover our own city.

From the beginning, CONTACT inserted photographic exhibitions into unexpected urban contexts, so that (as art will do) the photographs took on new meaning from their surroundings and made the nature of their surroundings clearer.

To keep up with CONTACT over the last decade, we have had to keep up with Toronto. What started as a way to show photographs eventually revealed itself as a way to exhibit a city – a city that never stops mutating (ethnically, commercially, architecturally), a city moving so fast that even longtime residents have trouble really knowing it. For those who seek the essence of this city, whether living here or visiting, the last 10 years have written a new rule: Follow CONTACT and find Toronto.

While the material CONTACT shows comes from around the world, the event itself has remained profoundly local even as it has grown into the largest annual photography event in North America. In addition to galleries and museums, CONTACT has placed photography in hundreds of locations, and those who care about it have followed the photos from chic hotel lobbies to almost inaccessible laneways, to restaurants and office buildings, to noisy bars, to elegant gyms and to otherwise empty warehouses. It has placed photographs in junk stores that yearn to be antique shops and diners that yearn to be bistros. It has put them on billboards and in bus shelters and subway stations. CONTACT exhibitions have hung in the Consulate General of the Republic of Korea and the University of Toronto law school, not to mention Sully's Boxing and Athletic Club.

By welcoming the photographs and the people who see them (almost a million in 2005, not counting those who see CONTACT shows in transit locations), all of these places reveal themselves to our gaze. Thus the city opens itself to its own citizens, by inadvertence as much as anything else. This function has become so vital a part of CONTACT that it now ranks in importance right beside the photographs themselves. It's an annual gift of renewal for the city and all the people who love it, a ritual of urban celebration, an urban trekking expedition.

Of course photography itself, whether seen during CONTACT or in some other milieu, has always been essentially an urban art form. It was born not long before the great metropolis became humanity's main home and

it kept pace with cities as they developed their own way of life and even their own character types – such as the *flâneur*, the stroller who exhibits himself as he shrewdly observes the ballet of the streets. Walter Benjamin, poet and celebrant of the *flâneur*, wrote that there's so much pleasure to be taken from the act of observing street life that "with each step, the walk takes on greater moment."

The street photographer, combining the spontaneity of a folk artist with the confident eye of a designer, emerged as one of the great cultural figures of the last century, a *flâneur* with circumspect camera, who could use the streets as a studio and turn glancing moments into permanent artifacts. Like the *flâneur*, the street photographer signalled a new phase in the nature of urbanism: The street became a stage where art was made with the click of a shutter.

Hundreds of thousands of street photographs have taught one simple yet demanding rule to all those who would honour their cities: Pay attention; try to know what's going on around you. This is the maxim that produced the world-shaping ideas of Jane Jacobs, the writer and activist, and that remains the basis of the urban sensibility.

Still, it is the art of photography that provides this May festival with its reason for being and its great appeal. Now we explore CONTACT annually in pursuit of the new – looking not for novelty but for fresh and previously undisclosed meaning. This is what Diane Arbus, quoted in the first CONTACT magazine, meant when she said, "I really believe there are things which nobody would see unless I photographed them." In this she spoke for all ambitious photographers.

Roland Barthes, on the other hand, defined the feelings of those of us who simply love to look at photography. In his book *Camera Lucida* (1981), Barthes said that when we confront a photo that carries meaning for us, one that contains intelligent conflict as well as beauty, we feel something much more piercing than mere pleasure or fascination, something both forceful and mysterious: "An internal agitation, an excitement, the pressure of the unspeakable which wants to be spoken."

Dreams play a large role in the making of photographs, as they do in the building of cities. Since the 1970s Torontonians have carried in their minds a dream city, a metropolis of pluralism, a place where a multitude of cultures somehow rise together and converge into an expression of freedom, peace, choice and opportunity. This remarkable place, now the very core of our civic hopes and ambitions, will free us from the strictures of tribalism and allow us to live as we want and (should we choose) to move from one quasi-tribal social unit to another or even to belong to several at once. To the extent that this big-town utopia exists, photographers tirelessly depict it and CONTACT loyally reflects their achievements.

Robert Fulford is a columnist for the *National Post* and the author of *The Triumph of Narrative: Storytelling in the Age of Mass Culture*.