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# PHOTOGRAPHY

Cynthia Johnston,  
from *Freddy and Ceydye*,  
2022



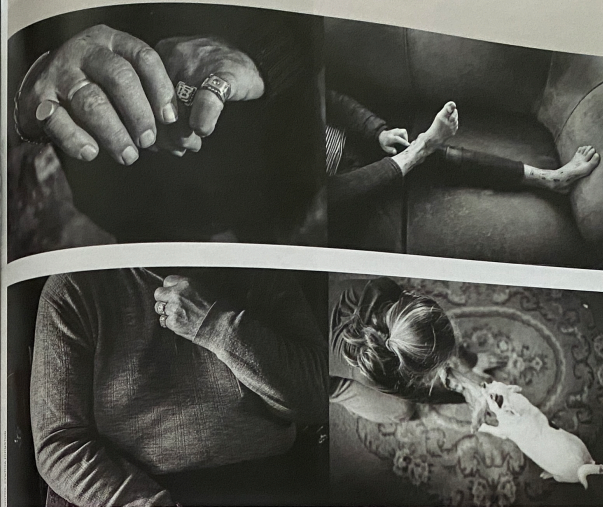
## Notes on CONTACT

Toronto's photography festival celebrates 28 years

BY PETER WATSON

**THE CONTACT PHOTOGRAPHY FESTIVAL** began in 1997 and for the last 15 years Scotiabank has sponsored it. However, last year they announced that they would be ending their relationship with the festival. It's a trend that can be seen elsewhere in the arts. It has also been confirmed that 2025 will be Scotiabank's last year sponsoring Hot Docs. Bell concluded its partnership with TIFF in 2023, wanting to invest in other businesses. This could reflect the current economic climate or a more politically motivated move. Whatever the reason, there is an opportunity for another corporate organization to become involved as a lead sponsor. After all, CONTACT is one of the largest photography festivals in the world and has a proven track record of inviting influential artists to exhibit work in past years. So far, that hasn't happened.

CONTACT receives money from the Toronto Arts Foundation, the Ontario Arts Council and the Canada Council for its operating budget. Plus, there are several artists within the festival who receive help from the Toronto Arts Council. This year's festival is much reduced from recent years due to diminished funding but remains one of the key cultural events in the Toronto arts calendar. One can certainly hope that more sponsorship will return to CONTACT much as it has for TIFF.



Cynthia Johnston, from *Freddy and Ceydye*, 2022

**ONE OF THIS YEAR'S HIGHLIGHTS** is the Photobook Lab Pop-up Reading Room. The festival will be presenting the Sustainable Photobook Publishing Network, an initiative which was founded in 2021 by Tasmin Green in the UK. She will be there in person during the festival leading a workshop. The aim is to discuss and share ideas on approaches and issues concerning environmentally friendly printed photobooks.

The importance of photobooks within the world of photography should never be underestimated. The gallery wall space is temporary, and images can be viewed in an order that the artist may not consider ideal. The book allows sequencing to become rigid. Images placed opposite each other on adjoining pages suddenly take on a second meaning: a narrative is being constructed.

However, the production of photobooks does have an impact on the environment. I was once in a printing house and witnessed the vast amount of paper that can be wasted in chasing the right colour correction and look for an image. Creating a proper photobook is a tricky process, one that has to balance artistry with economics and ecological concerns. Making sustainable books is a true concern for photographers and their audience.

One of the artists showing their books at this event is Cynthia

Johnston, a Quebec-based image maker. As part of her practice, she explores intimate family narratives. Her book, entitled *Freddy and Ceydye*, deals with organ donation. Her daughter Ceydye received one part of a liver when she was young and Freddy, a stranger at the time, the other half. The idea of toxic overload causing organ failure led Johnston to explore the notion of producing photobooks from a sustainable perspective. What makes her book stand out is that the pages are not stapled together so it can be disassembled with each page becoming an image in its own right. This is then designed to hang on the wall as an exhibition.

For Johnston, this idea of a book that becomes an exhibition was inspired by the work of the Indian photographer Dayanita Singh. Her book was first shown in 2022 in St. John, New Brunswick at the St. John Arts Centre and has subsequently been exhibited in numerous places. Made with old stock paper and recycled ink, the images in the book are not only thought provoking but are also incredibly well seen and executed. Paired with a genuine understanding of the use of natural light, this book and other examples of sustainable photobook publishing are highly recommended. They will be on view at The Photobook Lab Pop-Up Reading Room at 80 Spadina Avenue in downtown Toronto.



**FOR THE FIRST TIME** in its history, CONTACT's submission form has a box to check if the images are AI generated. AI could become a serious issue for the festival. The festival has no plans to reject exhibitions that have been produced artificially, stating they have no wish to censor work. However, there will be disclaimers next to images informing the viewer if AI was involved. This is as far as the festival currently feels they need to go. A line in the sand has been drawn but it has already become blurred.

Although the AI debate will probably be discussed and unpacked at length more in the halls of academia, it will of course find its way into galleries and photobooks. Published late last year by MACK as an SPBH Edition was the book *Cursed* by Charlie Engman. It claims to "challenge our preconceptions of how the world should be and appear." This work, which assembles images from the "murk" of the internet, has already taken a lot of criticism, especially online and particularly on Instagram. It all feels very reminiscent of when digital photography started to appear. However, this somehow feels more threatening.

Organizations like the World Press Awards have already faced issues with digital manipulation and staged images. It does seem that this is photography's burden to carry. A medium that struggled for a long time to be taken seriously by the art world must routinely be forced to defend itself. AI is clearly the next battle for photography to fight, and how festivals like CONTACT deal with this dilemma may define how smaller shows around the world follow suit. The association with AI and misinformation, especially when seen within the realms of social media, could create more of an appetite for "real" images. Plus, the photobook space continues to be an accessible way to engage with the medium in an offline way. So perhaps all is not lost.

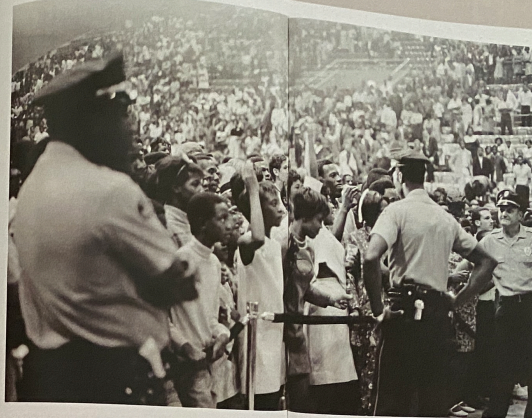
Christina Leslie,  
*Pinhole Portraits  
and Places*



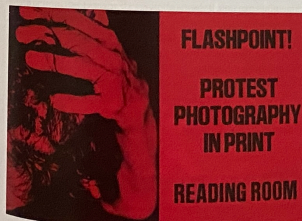
**STEPHEN BULGER**, one of the founders of the CONTACT photography festival, has championed the medium for over 30 years in his own gallery. During CONTACT, an artist's work from the festival is always exhibited upon his gallery's walls. This year that honour goes to Christina Leslie, a Jamaican-Canadian image maker whose work investigates such themes as decolonization, identity, migration, marginalization and her West Indian heritage. Her work for the festival is entitled *Pinhole Portraits and Places*. It is rooted in the analog technique of pinhole cameras: a basic device that requires a light proof box and an aperture (pinhole) instead of a lens and light sensitive material attached to the rear of the box. After some experimenting, Leslie turned her digital camera body—with the use of items such as tea bags, tape and gauze—into a hybrid pinhole camera. She says, "I observed a glaring absence of Black representation in historical European art, where depictions often reflected a colonial, white-dominant perspective. Between 2017 to 2019, I created pinhole portraits of Black community members to challenge this exclusion and reframe early art history and photography."

Her exhibition is a mixture of portraits and places in parishes from Jamaica inspired by family stories of life before immigrating to Canada. These images encourage the viewer to consider a glimpse of the past as if one is exploring a forgotten memory. The portraits are "aimed to evoke the grandeur of commissioned paintings, drawing inspiration from Renaissance and Rembrandt-style illumination."

The Stephen Bulger Gallery will also be hosting, for the fourth year, the Photobook Fair where artists can apply (for a small fee) to have their photobook dummy reviewed by outstanding publishers such as GOST Books, a London (UK) based company which in the past has produced books such as *The Mennonites* and *The History of War* for Canadian Magnum photographer Larry Towell. Unfortunately, in Toronto, though there are a lot of great resources for photographers, like designers and printers, there are no dedicated photobook publishers. This could be a gap that CONTACT could fill at some point in the future, which would go a long way to helping them become more self-funding.



Doris Derby, *A Civil Rights Journey*, 2021



**IN THE CONTACT GALLERY** this year is an exhibition entitled *Flashpoint! Protest Photography in Print*. It's based on the book of the same title and contains over 250 images in seven chapters, which tackle topics such as gender, civil rights and war. Within the show are examples of pamphlets, posters, zines, photobooks, alternative newspapers and independent journals that draw attention to protest and resistance from the 1950's to the present day. Protest photography has a long and dramatic history. One can instantly think of images such as Malcolm Browne's photograph of the self-immolation of Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thích Quang Duc in protest of the South Vietnamese government and its persecution of Buddhists. Browne won the Pulitzer Prize for the image.

With so many crises around the world at the moment, this show should strike a note with most people that visit it. This will be the first time 90 assets from the book will be exhibited. The public will have access to these items and be able to pick them up and examine them. Other, rarer, examples will be under glass. The show will run until mid-June.

Ironically, there were protests last year by some artists refusing to work with organisations that have funding from Scotiabank due to their links with an arms manufacturer. This had no connection with the bank no longer funding CONTACT as that decision was made the previous year in 2023.





Susan Meiselas, *Kurdistan: In the Shadow of History*, 1997

**PLAYING A LARGER ROLE** In this year's festival are photobooks, and I see that as a positive move forward. Photobooks are a particular passion of mine, and I was fortunate back in 2018 to participate in a two-day workshop through CONTACT with Jason Fuller entitled *Visual Language: How Pictures Speak to Each Other*. This year there are a couple book making courses with Big River Bindery run by Andrew Huot, who is not only an experienced binder but also a conservator and printmaker. This is a creative relationship that was started last year. The course will teach people how to construct and bind a book. I've been on a few different weekend or day programs for book making and highly recommend trying it. It's fascinating to learn about what goes into constructing books. Pure analog!

I would encourage anyone who has a passion for photography to not only experience CONTACT but to also consider applying next year to show their work.

The thought of exhibiting one's work can be a scary proposition, and unfortunately, it can paralyse some people with unimaginable fear. Thoughts such as "I'm not good enough," "no one will turn up to see my work," "what if something mean is said about my images" can easily get into one's mind. Honestly, I can't tell you that any of the above won't happen.

I once had an opening night for an exhibition during a snowstorm and the only people there were myself and my partner. Days later when people finally drifted in, not everybody liked what I had done. Then I discovered one of my photographs had been removed as it had criticized a Canadian bank (not Scotiabank) that unbeknownst to me was a sponsor of the exhibition space. It's not difficult for politics and art to collide.

History is littered with examples. But don't let that deter you from your goal. It will require hard work, sleepless nights, worrying about second guessing your decisions, but I promise you that it's something you will not regret doing.

The clue to the CONTACT Photography Festival's on-going success is buried in plain sight within its name, "Photography." How this is redefined in the coming years at festivals, galleries, academic institutions and critical journals may very well be decided if CONTACT is still around in another 28 years. My sincere hope is that this festival one day celebrates its centennial.

Festivals like CONTACT do more than just give budding artists a chance to show their work in public. They also have the ability to bring communities together. It means allowing strangers to sit around a table to discuss why a particular order of images will work better in someone's photobook dummy. Or perhaps gather in a space that has been converted for a few weeks into a gallery where ideas and opinions can be shared over a drink.

These events can inspire, celebrate, and, yes, critique work. CONTACT not only creates a better city to live in but encourages a more well-rounded society. The former British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, once outrageously claimed that there was no such thing as society. Clearly, she had never visited Toronto during the month of May. ■

**Peter Watson** is passionate in showing the viewer the world as he perceives it and writing about his experiences. His photographic work reflects his desire to discover people and places that force the onlooker to question life outside the confines of the frame.

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