

the contributions from abroad but also on such native sources as amateur theatre at universities. These two excellent exhibits complement each other well in depicting aspects of this evolution.

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*Dictionary of Canadian  
Biography/Trinity College Archives*

CANADIAN MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY. Ottawa. Director: Martha Langford. Opening exhibitions. **Beau**. 7 May - 14 June 1992. 74 p. catalogue. **Portraits of the Companions of the Order of Canada**. 17 June - 8 September 1992. 162 p. catalogue. **Serge Tousignant: Phases in Photography**. 19 June - 13 September 1992. 82 p. Catalogue.

The Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography (CMCP) opened new facilities in downtown Ottawa on 7 May 1992, welcoming visitors and settling into normal operations. Moving through its public spaces and exhibits provided an opportunity to reflect on the place of photography within Canada's cultural establishment and on the role of this institution.

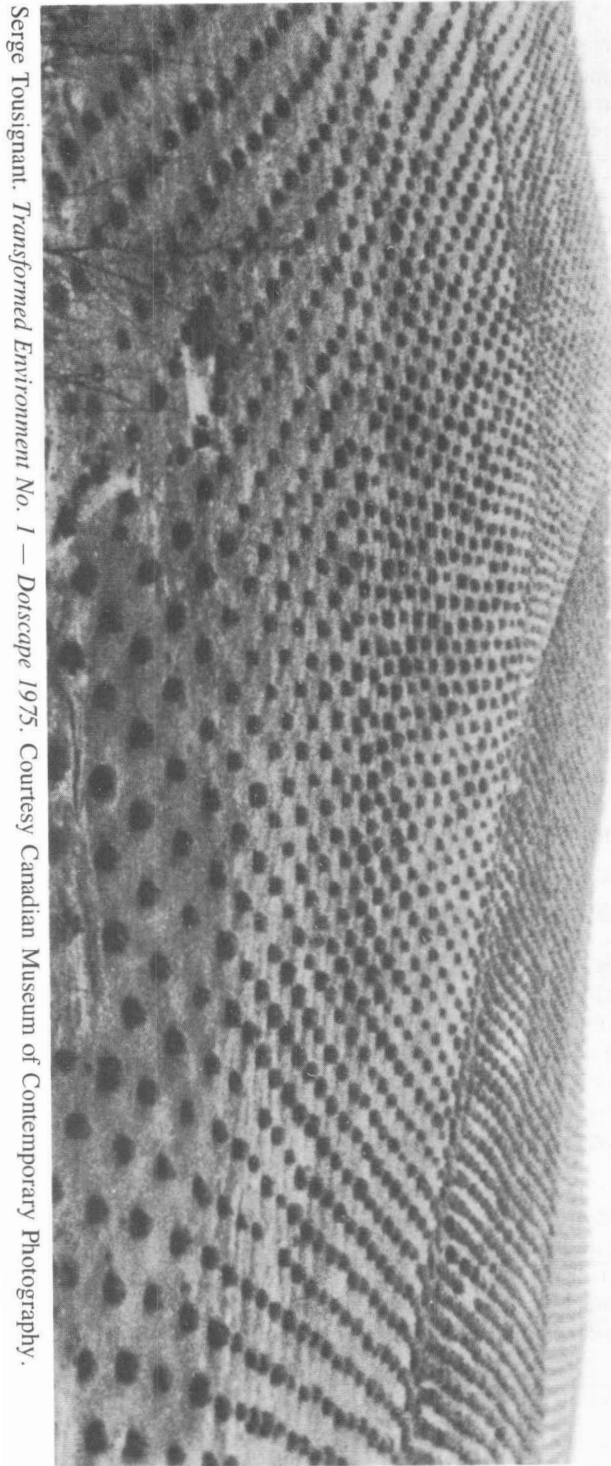
CMCP now occupies a prestigious location in Canada's capital. At 1 Rideau Canal, it is ensconced between the Parliament Buildings and the Château Laurier Hotel descending below street level alongside the canal locks. While the building materials visually integrate themselves into the adjacent Château, the contemporary look of the glass entrance pavilion distinguishes it from its neighbours. Standing on Confederation Square in front of the CMCP, visitors are surrounded by historic sites, national cultural institutions and the seat of government.

The site itself is enough to command respect for photography, and to entrench the CMCP among the established cultural institutions of the nation. The building's material elements reinforce the identification with prestige. The inner spaces confirm the spare, contemplative atmosphere of gallery presentation. From the sky-lit entrance, visitors descend from the busy street, past the glazed mezzanine and reception area and into a subterranean realm of protective custody. At this visible public intersection, photography now commands a prominent place in the nation's capital. What are the invisible costs of the new museum's prestige and permanence? Does its public presence among the tourist-travelled shrines of Ottawa promote accessibility? What alternatives exist in this country for an institution dedicated to contemporary photography?

We have only to look as far as the CMCP's own roots in the National Film Board of Canada (NFB), founded on John Grierson's belief in film as an active social instrument. In the early 1940s, the NFB absorbed the staff photographers of both the Canadian Government Motion Picture Bureau (which had been doing trade and travel promotion) and the Wartime Information Board. They became the NFB's Still Photography Division — at that time, an active image bank, where both staff and assignment photographers produced government advertising, social documents and public-interest photographs, which appeared in picture magazines and newspapers across the country and abroad. The images were a resource to be seen and used, with little energy devoted to creating and preserving a fonds.



Fred Cattroll. *Opening of the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 6 May 1992.* Courtesy Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography.



Serge Tousignant. *Transformed Environment No. 1 — Dotscape 1975*. Courtesy Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography.

During the 1960s and 1970s, under the direction of Lorraine Monk, the Stills Division shifted its orientation towards acquiring the work of the growing community of contemporary Canadian photographers. Its support for non-commercial work nurtured a formative period in Canadian photography. In addition to establishing an exhibition gallery in Ottawa, ambitious picture-books such as *Canada/A Year of the Land* (1967) were published, and a programme of travelling exhibitions was launched which, to this day, serves as an enduring model of the outreach and accessibility envisioned in federal cultural initiatives of the period. Complementing preservation holdings in other institutions such as the National Gallery and the National Archives, these photographs were acquired for presentation, outreach and travel. They helped to evolve a broadening view which embraced both the documentary and the creative sides of the medium, placing photography beyond the simple recording of events, people and places, and legitimizing it within the realm of artistic expression.

As part of a government institution, the Stills Division was subject to regular scrutiny, reorganization and review. By the early 1970s, however, many of its production functions had been placed under Information Canada, and its inactive holdings transferred to the then Public Archives of Canada. In the 1980s, moreover, its gallery was closed and its operations were threatened with dissolution. Responding to a lobby by the photographic community to save its activities, then communications minister Marcel Masse announced the creation of the new CMCP in 1985 — to be affiliated with the National Gallery of Canada, and to occupy new quarters on the present site.

Seven years later, judging by the opening exhibitions in its new building, the CMCP favours the role of presenting and interpreting Canada's fine-art photography. Entitled *Beau*, the Museum's first exhibition consisted of a sampling of acquisitions since 1985, exploring notions of beauty. Although many of the photographers reflect a debt to social realism and photojournalism, the dominant concerns addressed in this work range from the artisan aspects of fine printing, to aesthetic concerns about the nature of perception and construction of the image.

Two subsequent shows which shared the exhibit space over the CMCP's first summer illustrate vastly different aspects of current photographic activity. Harry Palmer is a Calgary photographer who travelled across the country in order to create *Portraits of the Companions of the Order of Canada* on display in the exhibition of that name. Organized in cooperation with the National Archives of Canada to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Order, and using prints from the National Archives' holdings, the exhibit recognizes the magnitude of the task of documentation which Palmer undertook. However, these exceptional individuals are represented in unremarkable portraits. While the subject content and genre provide easy access for the visitor, the parade of familiar faces makes no attempt to provoke an expanded appreciation of the sitters or of photography in general.

In contrast, the accompanying exhibition, *Serge Tousignant: Phases in Photography*, delivers a bold exploration of the bare essentials and boundaries of photography. While it may leave the casual viewer perplexed, this challenging exhibit focuses on technical and abstract elements of pattern, light and shadow, which recall both the medium's roots in optic science and its relationship to the formal concerns of two-dimensional visual art.

Although the museum's main exhibit space contains two areas, the installation of the two summer exhibits did not provide a firm visual separation. If one stood at the threshold of the display areas, both exhibitions were in view, one merging into the other. For independent exhibits which did not communicate with each other, however, the flowing presentation led to a significant compromise of the integrity of the material.

In addition to the 354 square metres of exhibit space, CMCP has a fifty-seat theatre which features Canadian cinema programming, a research centre (containing a library and slide collection) which is open to the public by appointment and a compulsory feature of any museum of the 1990s — the boutique. Behind the scenes, moreover, the museum has forty-five square metres of environmentally controlled storage space for its permanent collection of more than 150,000 images, and preparation facilities from which the publication, education and travelling exhibit programme reaches out.

Within the vast range of the medium's influence, the CMCP has developed a mandate which sets out to cover artistic and documentary Canadian photography since 1960. Perhaps it is the word "museum" in its name, the affiliation with the National Gallery and the permanent and prestigious new quarters, which all favour the recognition of the precious and unique in photography. Yet, in the self-conscious attention and preservation which exalt the medium, the still-vital impact of photography as a living endeavour in our culture is ignored. From photojournalism to advertising to snapshooting, however, there are other vital and creative aspects of photography which might equally deserve recognition by a cultural institution dedicated to the medium. Integrated into our commercial and popular culture are mostly anonymous works which are being instantaneously transmitted, endlessly reproduced, and plastered on billboards. In our personal lives, moreover, many of us participate in the medium as the photographer and the photographed.

Before the new building opened its doors, the CMCP was already a "museum without walls" bringing Canadian photography to Canadians. Creatively responding to straitened facilities in Ottawa, it has been circulating more than ninety exhibits a year to large and small venues across the country, and capitalizing on the inherently reproducible nature of photography by issuing publications. Without denying the need for adequate facilities, the challenge for the CMCP will be to ensure that the demands of a central focus do not drain active diffusion on the regional front. By preserving photography in a museum institution, the CMCP must also ensure that it does not become a constraining device which reifies and historicizes at the cost of recognizing the more ephemeral, yet immensely evocative, living impact of the medium. Perhaps this is where archives, less encumbered by the traditions of art-history and museum-curatorial practice, can develop their role in the interpretation of the more common or even most pervasive aspects of photography.

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