

## **Nocturnal Reveries at Toronto's *Nuit Blanche***

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## *Executive Summary*

Toronto's all night contemporary art festival *Nuit Blanche* is one of the most well-attended annual events in the city. Spanning most of the city's downtown core, this is a festival of truly epic proportions with a mandate to make contemporary art accessible to large audiences, and through this, initiate dialogue about how public space is used and produced. The festival must negotiate between being perceived as simply a spectacular presentation of contemporary art with its more profound, and self-appointed, mandate to initiate public discourse about contemporary urban living. However, the presentation of contemporary art in public space is an opportunity to strengthen the public sphere by galvanizing publics around issues of common concern.

At heart, *Nuit Blanche* foregrounds the diversity of artistic explorations but it calls for deeper thinking of how the work relates to the publics it hopes to address. The genius of *Nuit Blanche* is precisely in the diversity of possible ways that artists can communicate with the audience. This makes it ideally situated to aid in repopulating the public sphere with engaged citizens since the urban festival can be the space where political issues of public importance can be discussed in unexpected ways (thus thwarting the cynicism associated with the word "politics"). Further, *Nuit Blanche* can be where the possibility for play is explored, as according to political philosopher and leading cultural theorist Jacques Rancière, such possibility becomes a fundamental creative and political question that allows one to "discover how to produce forms for the presentation of objects, [and] forms for the organization of spaces, that thwart expectations. [For] the main enemy of artistic creativity as well as political creativity is consensus— that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, [and] competences."

We conclude that culture is inherently related to ideology and therefore to issues of power and domination. As such, it is not a realm separate from the political; rather it is precisely where political struggle is enacted. Moreover, the productive tensions created by critical artists can serve to open up areas of enquiry about what it means to live in the present of Toronto's cultural renaissance. Thus, the urban festival as a mode of public address becomes the locus of an "art of the possible" in the collective visioning of Toronto as a *creative city*. By conceiving of public art and *Nuit Blanche* as a specific mode of public address, it becomes clear that what is presented and how it is presented matters a great deal. This is so because there must be a sense of significance attached to the experience beyond simply having been involved in a festive escapade. Significance is meaning making and this requires that publics are able to apprehend and understand what the artist is doing within the broader context of the diverse society that informs both the making and the doing. The notion of public address is a reminder that striving for meaningful communication with festivalgoers should be the starting point for the presentation of contemporary public art.

The legacy of what *Nuit Blanche* will ultimately be remains uncertain. Yet, it is clear that if this festival is to fulfill its lofty mandate to initiate a critical discourse about the city, curators and artists must accept the responsibilities that come with the privilege of addressing the city's publics at such a grand scale. This would entail making a commitment to the public realm and striving to not only entertain, but also to make visible and give voice to the stories that otherwise might not have the space to be seen and heard. For one sleepless night, the restless city is watching, listening, and open to chance encounters with the extraordinary. *Nuit Blanche*, as a

celebration of contemporary art, can also be catalytic in realizing a reinvigorated and more inclusive public sphere.

## Nocturnal Reveries at Toronto's *Nuit Blanche*

*Joseph Banh*

### **Toronto the festival city**

The City of Toronto is archetypal of the contemporary metropolis. With cultural infrastructure in place and culture plan at hand, it is on its way to becoming the quintessential global cultural city (City of Toronto, 2003). Like other so-called *creative cities*, Toronto has newly retrofitted museums by star architects and an abundance of urban festivals. Some of the city's most well-attended festivals are Pride Week and the gay pride parade, the Luminato festival of arts and creativity, the Caribana festival of Caribbean culture, and the *Nuit Blanche* festival of contemporary art. While it has been suggested that architectural refurbishments and urban festivals are a means of hard-branding and soft-branding the city there are also important implications of such uses of culture for the public sphere (Evans, 2003; Julier, 2005). Such interventions in the cityscape contribute to how citizens conceive of their city by either upholding or challenging dominant ideologies of taste and class. However, the urban festival can also be the space/time where the symbolic ecology of the city is unframed with the possibility of nurturing a more creative and politically engaged public realm.

City festivals are planned and organized temporary ruptures in the urban fabric that take considerable resources to stage. They are often thematic and can range from small-scale neighbourhood block parties with the purpose of making oneself known to others (the idea that neighbourhoods should be built on the bonds of social capital), to mid-sized ones that occupy several blocks and highlight the unique spaces that make up the neighbourhood (such as

Toronto's ethnic/culinary street festivals), to large-scale festivals that take the better part of a year to plan and involve the collaboration of governmental bodies with private institutions.

### **Urban festivals and the public sphere**

Whether a festival is small, medium or large, they share a common theme of being aspirational in nature and are often produced around notions of community and identity-building through an activation (or reclamation) of space. Smaller and mid-sized festivals build a sense of community by operating on a series of exclusions, the ideal participants being self-identified members of the community. However, the logic of community building becomes problematic at larger-scale events for the audience that is being addressed can encompass the entire city. In this way, larger festivals must necessarily exist on a more abstract plane – moving towards the general rather than the particular in order to be as inclusive as possible. As a result, community building becomes rhetorical, ideological, rather than actual.

This understanding of festivals is instructive and serves as an occasion to assess critically precisely how one conceives of the city and how one defines *things public*. What constitutes a city? Who is included in the vision of the city? Who is excluded? Is it an ethical vision? What are the dominant discourses of the city? How might one act to create the city that one wants? These questions, and many more besides, are important ones that must be posed especially in a multicultural city like Toronto where a diversity of histories and backgrounds must ultimately coalesce around the larger project of the evolving city. If the city is a public good where, according to Hannah Arendt, “[t]he *polis*, properly speaking, is not the city-state in its physical location; it is the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together, and

its time-space lies between people living together for this purpose” (Arendt in Iveson, 2007: 10), then the urban festival, as a microcosm of the city, is an ideal space for the advancement of the public realm. It can be the starting point for discourses on *things public*.

By recognizing the paradoxical tension that exists between the festival as a community building cultural practice, and the ultimate impossibility of realizing a singular community, the large-scale urban festival can contribute to a more inclusive and vibrant public sphere. The specular qualities of the urban festival can reveal much about the current and future state of the *polis* because urban festivals are simultaneously about the past, present and future. They exist in relation to the past because, as typically annual events, they are produced and experienced relative to their predecessors. Yet they are inherently about the present because they reflect the current condition of the city and involve a sense of occasion and immediacy of experience as temporally bound events (they happen once a year for a limited time). Additionally, festivals are about the future because they are representative of the city in transition, each year incorporating the societal changes that affect the urban fabric while also being the space/time for articulating and performing the city-yet-to-be.

Because the urban festival is a highly visible public practice, it plays a significant role in the ideological construction of the city where certain visions of the city might privilege particular actors and interests to the detriment of others. This understanding of urban festivals and public culture is important, for as urban geographer Kurt Iveson notes:

urban imaginaries have quite real effects, to which we must be attentive...Do particular urban imaginaries, with their associated visions of what is in the best interests of the

city/public, privilege some interests over others by making them appear ‘universal’ rather than ‘particular’ or ‘parochial’ or ‘private’? Do the ‘shapes’ of these different imagined cities deprive anyone of “symbolic enrolment in the city (Ranciere, 1999: 23).” (Iveson, 2007: 41)?

Additionally, festivals take on the function of forming *procedural publics*; “a process-based approach to the public sphere [that] requires us to ‘stretch out’ our conception of the public to take into account the importance of a range of spatial practices to the making of publics” (Iveson, 2007, 11). The urban festival can thus be understood as a specific temporal and spatial *context for action*, which invite a particular *kind of action*, and which forms procedural publics, people who gather specifically as *collective actors* to experience the event and who might not do so under different circumstances. In other words, urban festivals mobilize publics who are motivated and intentional in their actions within a specific context.

The conception of festivals as a particular mode of public address highlights the fact that they are not neutral and innocuous events and calls attention to both the form that it takes (*how* ideas are communicated) and the content (*what* is being communicated). This in turn allows one to interrogate critically the ideologies associated with cultural practices such as the contemporary art festival *Nuit Blanche* and how it promotes or inhibits the realization of a more inclusive public sphere.

### **Toronto’s *all night contemporary art thing***

The City of Toronto’s *Nuit Blanche* is one of the city’s most well attended festivals. The annual twelve hour, dusk-to-dawn celebration of contemporary art boasts an estimated attendance ranging from 425,000 in its inaugural year of 2006; to 800,000 in 2007; and approaching

1,000,000 in 2008 (City of Toronto, 2008).<sup>1</sup> The official *Nuit Blanche* 2008 press kit “backgrounder” described the essence of the festival as:

a 12-hour event with a mandate to make contemporary art accessible to large audiences, while inspiring dialogue and engaging the public to examine its significance and impact on public space. *Nuit Blanche* is both a ‘high’ art event and a free populous [sic] event that encourages celebration and community engagement. From sunset to sunrise city spaces and neighbourhoods are transformed into temporary exhibitions. Unusual or forbidden spaces become sites of contemporary art open for all-night discovery and rediscovery.

While the celebratory aspect of *Nuit Blanche* is without question, claims to inspire dialogue and engage the public to examine contemporary art’s impact on public space suggests that beyond bringing “high” art to the masses there is an underlying social good that is to be achieved. At a basic level, the event serves to promote contemporary art practice in the city and expose works of art to broader publics than those who typically experience art in the rarified spaces of traditional art institutions (which tend to be viewed as spaces of exclusion). At another level, the festival marks a significant return of the public to city spaces and invites meditation on what it means to be Torontonians and how space is used and socially produced. It also holds the potential to encourage a more socially (and perhaps politically) engaged civic public.

Thus to the discerning observer, festivals can reveal much about the generosity of spirit (or lack of) of the publics that form around them as either cultural producers or consumers. *Nuit Blanche* then, can be understood as a platform not only for the production and presentation of contemporary art, but also for experimenting with provisional publics and practices of

publicness. The unpredictable nature of human interaction, and the way individuals perform in public, can be illuminating as to what a place is like and what values are most important to its constituents.

The significant increases in annual attendance for *Nuit Blanche* cannot simply be explained as an effect of increased publicity and hype around the event. To be sure, as more and more people become aware of the event, curiosity might be an initial motivator of participation, but at a deeper level, mass participation is a testament to the inherent sociability of human beings. Put simply, people like to be around other people. However, the reality of living in large urban centres means that like it or not, one *must* live with and be around others.

### **The festival as a mass phenomenon**

But as the eminent sociologist Zygmunt Bauman observes, “[g]iven the nature of today’s tasks, the main obstacles which urgently need to be examined relate to the rising difficulties in translating private problems into public issues, in congealing and condensing endemically private troubles into public interests that are larger than the sum of their individual ingredients, in recollectivizing the privatized utopias of ‘life-politics’ so that they can acquire once more the shape of the visions of the ‘good society’ and ‘just society’” (Bauman, 2001: 51). *Nuit Blanche*, with its talk of dialogue, community engagement, and public space, is an ideal platform for the maintenance of the public realm. As a model that has proven its efficacy at forming publics who largely attend with a degree of open-mindedness (after all, it is never certain what will be presented, and indeed, what constitutes “art” is itself open to debate) this particular festival is

uniquely positioned to activate publics with important implications and possibilities for diversity and democracy.

It also should be noted that the specificity of the City of Toronto plays a significant role in determining the success of the event. As one of North America's largest metropolises it is relatively safe, well organized with good infrastructure and generally efficient public transportation. These dimensions of the urban environment are essential to the staging of a large-scale public culture event like *Nuit Blanche* for as sociologist Sharon Zukin observes, the "most tangible danger" to public culture is the "politics of everyday fear," and as Bauman elaborates, "[t]he blood curdling and nerve-breaking spectre of 'unsafe streets' keeps people away from public spaces and turns them away from seeking the art and skills needed to share public life" (Zukin in Bauman, 2000: 94). Thus, Toronto's organization of city spaces and above all, a sense of security are affirmative of public culture and the project of contemporary urban living.

### **The stranger in our midst**

Whereas festivals require much effort to organize and stage, they also have a degree of randomness inherent to them, for it is never certain what may happen when large groups of people gather. They are popular and populist time-based, site contingent events that can only be successfully staged with the co-presence and participation of strangers. In addition, while they often involve a high degree of coordination and planning, the experience of festivals can never be directed by a singular purpose. It is precisely the possibility that something can happen which is completely unintended that makes urban festivals an important manifestation of the public realm.

Toronto's *Nuit Blanche* is a particularly interesting phenomenon, for it is (at least in theory) a festival devoted to critically examining how the city is socially constructed. Yet how might the intersections of contemporary art, curatorial practice, and public space contribute to the strengthening of Toronto's public realm? The challenge is to seriously consider how festival producers, curators and artists, conceive of the public and what larger social purpose is hoped for by the gathering of such publics. What remains unclear is the degree to which this dynamic and positive energy can be harnessed for a broader social good. At the least, it calls for a more intense linking of contemporary art practice to the social world, which means providing content that will direct public discourse towards the present condition of Toronto's urban experience.

*Nuit Blanche* has demonstrated that Torontonians have a desire to engage with contemporary art (festival attendance has steadily risen each year). Even so, it has been suggested that competition among festivals, both for audiences and for funding, might result in pressure to produce works that promote easily digestible and formulaic "spectacle" over content that might be more conceptually challenging.<sup>2</sup>

### **Communities of Occasion**

A festival of spectacles runs the risk of reducing the diversity of publics to what Bauman calls "communities of occasion" or "aesthetic communities," which are essentially phantom communities (Bauman, 2003: 32). In this scenario, the social bonds that are created are fleeting and superficial. Although it is true that the nature of festivals as ephemeral, time-bound events necessitate that the publics which coalesce around them must ultimately be "communities of occasion," the content of a festival that challenges perceptions and expectations could be

catalytic and a mover of human agency. In this case, the forming of provisional publics can be empowering, for when purposeful individuals come together in the spirit of collective engagement with the extraordinary (as is the case with *Nuit Blanche*), it is never certain what effects will resound beyond the night.<sup>3</sup>

The relatively open format of *Nuit Blanche* makes the city hospitable (at least for one evening) to a range of different events to occur regardless of official sanction. This is evident through the staging of performances and installations throughout the city by artists, who feel compelled to perform, but either do not feel the need for official (or institutional) decree of their status as artists, or are explicitly making a statement against institutionalized art practice. This aspect of *Nuit Blanche* is an avenue of possibility for attracting more diverse publics to join in the making of the *creative city*. Indeed, an engaged public that acts of its own accord to appropriate the format of the festival for their own ends should be the greatest compliment to *Nuit Blanche* and its most poignant benchmark of success.

### **The Strategic Vision of the Curator**

However, an urban festival at such a scale (extending across most of Toronto's downtown core) requires the effort and commitment of many individuals to be successfully staged (Figure 1). While this particular festival is devoted to showcasing contemporary art and artists, it clear that, above all, it is the curators who play one of the most significant roles, for it is they who will ultimately decide what the overarching theme of their zones will be and which artists will be exhibited to achieve these ends. Indeed, in a 1998 article entitled "The Curator's Moment," art

critic and curator Michael Brenson boldly declared that “the era of the curator has begun” (Brenson, 1998: 16).

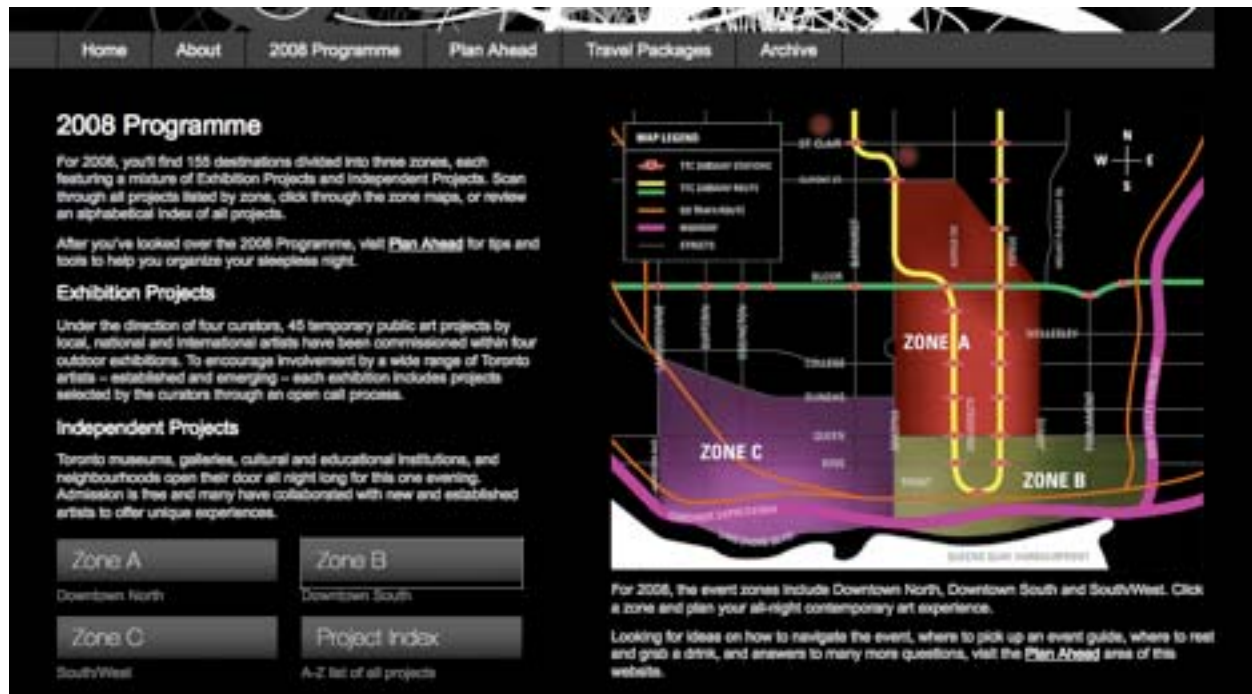


Figure 1: Area map indicating how the city is divided for the event.

This pronouncement was made in observation of the explosion of international biennales and triennales of contemporary art, and what the author saw as a common concern among international curators to understand and be able to “articulate the ability of art to touch and mobilize people and encourage debates about spirituality, creativity, identity, and the nation” (Brenson, 1998: 16). Brenson goes on to suggest, “The texture and tone of the curator’s voice, the voices it welcomes or excludes, and the shape of the conversation it sets in motion are essential to the texture and perception of contemporary art” (Brenson, 1998: 16). By extension, when contemporary art is presented in public space, as is the case with *Nuit Blanche*, there is a

responsibility to shape the conversation not only concerning the “perception of contemporary art,” but also in relation to the present condition of the public sphere.

The ideal role for the curator then, would be as a public intellectual who presents works of social significance that are “semantically available” rather than simply bringing “high” art to the masses (Kester, 2004: 38). This is not an easy task, for curators today are notoriously overtaxed with duties ranging from research, administration, collections management, and interpretation, to education and fund-raising while often juggling multiple curatorial projects. However, if *Nuit Blanche* were to be truly an important public culture project then this would mean taking it beyond a showcase of contemporary art and notions of “public art” as “accessible” simply because it is located in a physically accessible public place (Miles, 1997; Knight, 2008).

One of the virtues of the *Nuit Blanche* platform is the manner in which the official exhibitions are organized through a distribution of curatorial responsibility to multiple curators. Because each curator will bring to the event a very different relation to contemporary art (in the types of artists they champion and the kinds of art they prefer), orientation to the city’s publics, their own experiences of place, and their specific worldview (which entails how they locate themselves in the world and informs how they choose to act in the world), the possibilities for creating multi-layered dialogues about art and contemporary urban living are expanded.

## **A tale of three curators – *Nuit Blanche 2008***

### **Zone ‘A’– City Hall (Downtown North)**

For *Nuit Blanche 2008*, the approaches to the festival programming are revealed as quite diverse and idiosyncratic when the curatorial strategies for each zone are individually assessed.<sup>4</sup> Zone ‘A’ (downtown north) independent curator and writer Gordon Hatt’s project was entitled *The New World*.<sup>5</sup> His was a rather playful and light-hearted approach foregrounding the possibilities for play and urban exploration under the cover of night. Hatt’s zone was arguably the most populist (as evidenced by the presentation of works that referenced popular culture), with an intention to entertain the publics that moved through the area.

As well, Hatt took as a primary concern an ecological perspective to the works he commissioned, with a consideration for the afterlife of the projects. Because the festival is such a large-scale endeavour, Hatt was mindful of the ecological footprint that would be created by the artists in his Zone. This is exemplified by Katherine Harvey’s *Waterfall*, which took the labour of many volunteers working with the artist to construct a faux waterfall out of used plastic bags and other recyclable plastic containers (figure 2). While the project makes a clear statement about



**Figure 2.** *Waterfall*, (2008). Katherine Harvey. Post-consumer recyclable plastics. Zone 'A'. photo: City of Toronto.

consumerism and the amount of waste generated by the culture in which one lives, it was also a visually stunning piece. Further, the process of reclaiming post-consumer waste as the materials of the art piece and its proper disposal afterwards, was an important element of the work.

It is clear that Hatt intended to engage his audience in a fun and participatory manner. This is evident by projects such as New York artist Jillian McDonald's *Zombies in Condoland* (viewers



**Figure 3.** *Zombies in Condoland*, (2008). Jillian Anderson. Collaborative performance & film. Zone 'A'. Photo: City of Toronto.

were given the opportunity to dress up as zombies and enact scenes typical of the genre which the artist filmed and subsequently edited into a short film), and Berlin technoratis Project Blinkenlights' *Stereoscope*, where the curved facade of Toronto's City Hall was turned into a



**Figure 4.** *Stereoscope*, (2008). Project Blinkenlights. Interactive Multi-media installation. Zone 'A'. photo: City of Toronto.

giant screen that could be programmed to show images and on which people could play video games (figure 3 and 4). Hatt's intervention illustrated that contemporary art need not be the private language of art world initiates, but can be synonymous with any other form of popular entertainment. His strategy clearly resonated with audience members since artists in his zone were awarded all three "People's Choice" awards (audience members voted for their favourite works online).

### **Zone 'B' – Financial District (Downtown South)**

For Zone 'B' (downtown south), situated in the heart of Toronto's financial district, prominent curator Wayne Baerwaldt staged *Honest*. Responding to the specificity of place that is home to many of the countries largest and most powerful financial corporations, Baerwaldt's interventions ranged from Winnipeg-based Noam Gonick's timely video installation *Commerce Court* (figure 5) a comment on the looming financial meltdown, to *Don Coyote*, 2008, Calgary performance artist Matt Masters' country/western cabaret-style collaboration with Terrence Houle, and *Quixotic*, 2008 a strangely compelling operatic performance by Montreal's 2boys.tv (figures 6 and 7 respectively).

Baerwaldt approached his curatorial enterprise with Toronto's existing art community in mind. In selecting artists for his zone, he first considered the types of cultural industries that were already present in Toronto and how he could strategically present works that would resonate with these communities while attempting to create opportunities for his artists to make alliances with their contemporaries in Toronto. Baerwaldt pointed out the impossibility of satisfying broad publics at an event like *Nuit Blanche* since festival goers attend for various reasons with different sensibilities and tastes.

**Figure 5.** *Commerce Court, 2008.* Noam Gonick. Video Installation. Zone 'B'. photos: Joe Banh.





**Figure 6.** *Don Coyote*, (2008). Performance. Matt Masters, Terrence Houle, Zone 'B'. photo: Peter Steiner.



**Figure 7.** *Quixotic*, (2008). Performance. 2boyz.tv. Zone 'B'. photos: Joe Banh

Thus, rather than programming his zone by attempting to anticipate what the public wants to see, Baerwaldt chose to focus instead on artists whom he believed would have a pre-existing audience of peers. For example, the selection of Matt Master's (who is also a professional musician) was in part due to his connection with the music industry in his hometown of Calgary, and 2boys.tv had a pre-existing connection to Toronto's theatre industry. As well, Baerwaldt wished to promote the work of artists that were perhaps not shown (or under represented) in Toronto.

The primary strategy for Baerwaldt would appear to have been to use the festival as a networking site where artists whom he deemed to have some sort of affinity with Toronto's cultural scene could be exposed to their colleagues as well as the public at large. This entailed working with a broad understanding of Toronto's cultural milieu, (identifying the extant institutions and industries and how his artists could fit along the spectrum) and then programming his zone accordingly.<sup>6</sup>

### **Zone 'C' – Liberty Village**

Haema Sivanesan, current executive director of Toronto's South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC), responded to her site in a very specific way. Due to her training in architecture, she sought to create a dialogue with the physical place that is Liberty Village, a fast gentrifying area made up of industrial factories and looming brick buildings. Sivanesan's curatorial undertaking was *Multiple Selves – Strange Destinations*. As a specialist in contemporary South Asian art and an Australian expatriate, her curatorial project was primarily concerned with promoting the

work of artists from the southern hemisphere. In a way, her zone represented a concern to not only showcase more diverse bodies of work at *Nuit Blanche*, but through the showing of such work, attract a broader demographic of festivalgoers.<sup>7</sup>

This sensibility is very much informed by her community building work with SAVAC, which seeks to inculcate a relationship between contemporary art and South and Southeast Asian communities who do not traditionally have a connection to notions of Western art as a separate sphere. While the artists she selected, like Mumbai artist Shilpa Gupta's video installation *Untitled, 2004-2005* (figure 8) and Pakistani artist Bani Abidi's *Reserved, 2006* (figure 9) appeared to be more political in nature, Sivanesan wondered whether it was possible to show South Asian work that was *not* political, which reflect the lived experiences of artists in the global south.

Her response to the site specificity of Toronto as a relative new comer was to envision it as a layered and textured space. The curatorial intervention thus represented a reframing of Toronto through the contingent experiences of artists whose diasporic identities are necessarily an



**Figure 8.** *Untitled*, 2004-2005. Shilpa Gupta. Video Installation. Zone 'C'. photo: Tom Legrady

ongoing negotiation with the particular places where they live or work. Sivanesan's Zone 'C' was an opportunity for artists and viewers alike to engage in a process of cultural translation, questioning the limits of language through an aesthetic experience while trying to prevent such gestures from being perceived as tokenistic.

Whereas Gordon Hatt conceived of the city at night as a playground where publics could experience Toronto in new and exciting ways, Wayne Baerwaldt saw it as the site of intense and pre-existing cultural activity and sought to create interventions that would respond to and enrich the Toronto arts community. Haema Sivanesan seemed to approach *Nuit Blanche* as an urban art festival that is one among a spectrum of possible venues where the works of artists who are under-represented in the official art centres of North America and Europe can present their work.



**Figure 9.** *Reserved*, 2006. Bani Abidi. Video installation. Zone 'C'. photo: Tom Legrady

Upon closer examination of what informed each curator's specific practice of presenting contemporary art, it becomes apparent that there are many complex and overlapping issues involved, whether it is tactics to engage a range of publics, serving the local arts community, or art world politics. Regardless of their individual motivations for selecting and presenting the works of their respective artists, one common element identified was that *Nuit Blanche* represented a specific space/time frame through which festivalgoers could engage contemporary art on their own terms.

The brilliance of *Nuit Blanche* for all three curators was that the event demonstrated that there is a great interest in contemporary art and that publics are excited and motivated to experience it. Because the urban art festival is not a traditional venue for the presentation of contemporary art, and *Nuit Blanche* has proven that it can draw record numbers of people, the possibilities of

public address in the service of the public realm are expanded. However, in order for *Nuit Blanche* to fulfill its potential to strengthen Toronto's public realm, artists and curators alike must reconsider how their respective practices relate to the social world politically and ethically. The apparent democratization of the art experience must be complimented with thoughtful and thought-provoking programming that primarily seeks a dialogue with the viewer.

### **Perspectives on contemporary (public) art**

While it can be argued that *Nuit Blanche*, as a massive one-night-a-year event, is more appropriately understood as a symbol of Toronto's aesthetic excess, such an argument would be guilty of over-simplification. Conversely, the idea that a contemporary art festival can aid in reinvigorating the public sphere may appear idealistic and over-determined. Yet when contemporary art is produced in the context of an urban festival with the spaces of the city as the site of its presentation, the works created enter the realm of contemporary *public art*. Because Toronto is a city of diverse cultures one needs to consider how the presentation of public art not only encourages discussions of the use of space in the city, but also how it responds to the needs of the diverse constituents who use such spaces.

The qualification of contemporary *public art* is significant, for as philosopher Hilde Hein observes, "While...all art is to some degree public, public art merits its name in virtue of the fact that the creation of a public is its point of departure. Public art presupposes the public sphere and produces a public in relation to that concept. Unlike popular or mass art, it does not assume a pre-existent generic audience to be entertained or instructed but sets out to forge a specific public by means of an aesthetic interaction" (Hein, 2006: 49).

In this way, *Nuit Blanche* is first a festival about the public sphere. At one level, it mobilizes publics who are motivated and intentional in their actions (attending a contemporary art festival), while the content of the festival presents a variety of individual artworks that address the viewers as active participants. Further, the distinct space/time of the urban festival is particularly useful as a space to construct relations and pose socially significant questions “as if the space/time frame was temporarily occupied with issues not at stake in other times and spaces” (Cramerotti, 2006: 54). Put another way, *Nuit Blanche* is a particular *time* where *space* is redistributed and reorganized, where issues that might not find an audience in another space/time can be inserted into the public realm. From this perspective, contemporary art practice is revealed to be highly compatible with the discourse on the current state of the public realm.

### ***Nuit Blanche* 2008– Art of the possible**

The significance and potential of this temporary rupture in the space/time of the urban fabric can only be realized if there is recognition of an ethico-political dimension to what is presented at *Nuit Blanche*. This would entail a necessary engagement with politics, which is not to say that the art presented must be antagonistic, heavy-handed, or radically didactic. However, the work should not shy away from polemics and should engage in a critical questioning of the artist /viewer relationship where it is recognized that “spectatorship is not the passivity that has to be turned into activity. It is our normal situation. We learn and teach, we act and know as spectators who link what they see with what they have seen and told, done and dreamt. There is no privileged medium as there is no privileged starting point. There are everywhere starting points and knot points from which we learn something new” (Rancière, 2007). Approaching the

production of art with the explicit intention of communicating with the viewer (versus an approach that celebrates art for art's sake which elevates it into a realm that transcends society), and presupposing the capacity for understanding, enlivens and fortifies the public sphere.

As for the question of politics, when Kester writes that “dialogical exchange is used...to provide a consensual ground for public acts of political speech and resistance” this is not to suggest that dialogical art practices primarily seek consensus (Kester, 2004: 181). The consensual ground is, rather, a condition of public address. Indeed, it has been suggested by political philosophers that consensus is destructive of diversity rather than productive since it involves a levelling out of multiple points of view, brackets out the very real relations of power that exist between interlocutors, and ignores the incommensurability of life experiences that informs the political subject.<sup>8</sup>

From this vantage point, an approach to contemporary art making -- as a mode of public address in the service of strengthening the public sphere -- cannot be predicated on an idealized vision of consensus and community.

Instead, as Rancière explains,

If you think that politics in general is the gathering of human beings in some sort of community, you raise the problem: what is the best kind of community that we can imagine? But, in my view, politics always comes as a kind of exception to the way in which, generally, communities are gathered, it comes as an interruption. There are factual communities, grounded in the power of birth or money, and there is politics as the process of challenging the meaning of these factual communities through the operation

of declassification. The process of politics creates dissensual collectivities. These collectivities give birth to new capacities and they bear ideas of future communities (Blechman, Chari and Hasan, 2005, 291.)

Dissensus, interruption, and declassification, as the location of the political are instructive because this suggests how a critical engagement with the public realm through art might be operationalized. While it might be suggested that festivals are merely cultural events, and not political ones, it must be stated that culture and politics are not mutually exclusive and that there is significant overlap. Culture, as the manifestation of the social involves the mediation of multiple perspectives, histories, and experiences which include experiences of otherness and oppression.

Culture is inherently related to ideology and therefore to issues of power and domination. As such, it is not a realm separate from the political; rather it is precisely where political struggle is enacted. Moreover, the productive tensions created by critical artists can serve to open up areas of enquiry about what it means to live in the present of Toronto's cultural renaissance. Thus, the urban festival as a mode of public address becomes the locus of an "art of the possible" in the collective visioning of Toronto as a *creative city*. By conceiving of public art and *Nuit Blanche* as a specific mode of public address, it becomes clear that what is presented and how it is presented matters a great deal. This is so because there must be a sense of significance attached to the experience beyond simply having been involved in a festive escapade. Significance is meaning making and this requires that publics are able to apprehend and understand what the artist is doing within the broader context of the diverse society that informs both the making and the doing. The notion of public address is a reminder that striving for meaningful communication with festivalgoers should be the starting point for the presentation of contemporary public art.

### ***Commerce Court (2008) -- An analysis***

An example of an artwork presented at Toronto's *Nuit Blanche* 2008 which is exemplary in fusing polemics with populism, with the clear intention of addressing festival-goers, is Winnipeg artist Noam Gonick's video installation *Commerce Court* 2008 (figure 5).<sup>9</sup> This site-specific work was both timely and provocative. Exhibited at the height of the global economic meltdown, the installation was presented at Commerce Court in the heart of Toronto's financial district. The video was projected onto a large cathedral window on the outer facade of the art deco style CIBC Wood Gundy building (Commerce Court North building), "the corporate and investment banking arm of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC)."<sup>10</sup>

The installation was an explicit critique of the neoliberal logic of rampant deregulation of capital flows and unfettered financial accumulation at all costs, but presented in an ironic and humourous way. With an actor delivering a monologue addressed to the viewer (not unlike a late-night television infomercial), delivering lines such as, "Are you tired of the stock market roller coaster? Wanna get off?" while offering suggestions on how to profit from global warming and urging the viewer to "Get in before the big thaw," the work addressed various pressing issues of the day in a vernacular that was engaging and accessible.

The play on various conventions -- television infomercials and stereotypes of the amoral corporate shill -- further underscored Gonick's understanding of the public he wished to address. Responding to the site specificity of Toronto's financial district, his piece was a scathing parody of the mentality of the Bay Street "suits" who populate the area by day, but also implicated the viewing public as both victims of *and* accomplices to the imminent financial crisis. By projecting

the video directly onto the seemingly unshakeable and solid building, Gonick reminded us that although financial institutions appeared infallible (and by extension that there is no alternative to neoliberalism) they are human made and as such susceptible to human action and intervention. To be sure, the work was neither didactic, nor outright antagonistic. It was however a layered and entertaining critique of global capitalism. By activating the space where the installation was presented (the corporate headquarters of CIBC, one of Canada's largest financial institutions), in the context of a contemporary art festival sponsored by another of Canada's largest banks (Scotiabank), the work invited meditation on how corporations and financial institutions were so thoroughly imbricated in our lives.

*Commerce Court* 2008 is highly amenable to the reinvigoration of the public sphere and is illustrative of an approach to art making which understands that "If people are made to feel stupid or ridiculous, they react resentfully toward the incomprehensible source that excludes them. *Public art compels both artists and public to refine communicative skills, and the endeavor cements their affinity*" [emphasis added] (Hein, 2006, 55). Gonick's production foregrounds the importance of communication, and while it can be criticized for being a one-way communication, it was nonetheless well conceived and well executed. While it was only a two-minute video played on a continuous loop, the combination of the site (Commerce Court is quite hospitable with a fountain around which people could rest) and the humorous content presented in an easily accessible manner, caused many people to linger.

## The lesson of *Project Business Class* (2008)



**Figure 10.** *Project Business Class*, (2008). Magnetic Laboratorium/Marisela La Grave. Inter-media Installation. Video, sounds, interactive performance. Zone 'B'. photo: Joe Banh

Another more ambitious, though in my view ultimately unsuccessful attempt at critically engaging the *Nuit Blanche* public, is New York City based Magnetic Laboratorium's (led by artistic director Marisela La Grave) *Project Business Class* (figure 10). Similarly situated in Toronto's financial district, this work was much more complex, both conceptually and logistically, which in the end was its undoing. Staged in a parking lot accessible via an alley or side street, the intermedia installation involved three different projections (pre-recorded footage as well as live camera feeds), a pre-recorded soundtrack, a live soundtrack, live performance (a mixture of New York and Toronto-based performers) and invited audience participation.

The concept behind *Project Business Class* was a critical questioning of the very notion of a “business class” and how being hailed as such comes with particular benefits— specifically, freedom of movement. The performance unfolded in an ambiguous checkpoint, not unlike what one would encounter at airports or border crossings (though of course visually the space did not resemble an airport or typical land border crossing). It was deliberately unclear whether people were arriving or departing and equally unclear as to their reasons for moving through the space.

However, in the space of the installation privileged notions of class were inverted. The performers (some dressed as typical “yuppies” or urban professionals and others dressed in casual wear or outlandish costumes) and spectators were invited to approach the checkpoint. Depending on what “class” they appeared to belong to (based primarily on physical attributes such as type of attire), they were either subjected to a prolonged search of their personal effects and denied entry/exit, or immediately allowed to pass through the checkpoint.<sup>11</sup>

Yet various elements ultimately worked against the intentions of the artistic director, and the result was a rather incoherent combination of noise (what sounded like pre-recorded airplane noises), unintelligible dialogue (the pre-recorded soundtrack was overwhelming), and confusing visuals with equally confusing attempts to engage the audience to participate. While the concept was quite strong, the staging was too complex which overwhelmed the viewer. Further, if one was not aware of the ideas that drove the work, it became a guessing game as to what was actually happening. As well, for spectators not familiar with installations that called for viewer participation it could be quite a confusing situation.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, while the overall effect of the project was quite energetic and compelling, it ultimately missed the mark in communicating with the viewer due to the complexity of the production, which in turn obscured the concept. The problems with the project are possibly an effect of the artist not having the time to refine the performance since her New York crew essentially drove up the night before *Nuit Blanche* and were unable to set up and rehearse until the day of the event. As well, she was collaborating for the first time with the Toronto group of performers without the time to establish a working relationship and explore the possibilities of the project collaboratively.

Still, *Project Business Class* is instructive for future attempts to present such complex and multilayered installations at a festival like *Nuit Blanche*. Because there are time constraints on the part of both audience and artists, it is best to keep the project as simple as possible in its execution while maintaining the integrity of the concept. This ultimately comes down to the sensibilities of the artist and what they are willing to sacrifice for the overall effect of the work. Further, if the artist is not local, it could present some serious challenges to staging participatory work that requires the collaboration of so many different individuals. The fact is that participatory artwork is heavily process focused and requires a lot of time to develop. Throw into the mix a site-specific mandate and the project becomes even more complex since this requires not only coordination between individuals, but also an awareness of the history of the place of presentation.

## Open call and the possibility for play



**Figure 11.** *the common and the tense (a sound ecology)*, (2008). Byron Kent Wong. Interactive sound and multimedia installation. Zone 'B'. photo: Peter Steiner

Because the notion of “spectacle” continues to be a concern on the part of curators and producers, the strategic presentation of artworks that require interaction and viewer cooperation could be useful in mitigating the perceived negative effects of having artworks slip into the realm of “spectacle.”<sup>13</sup>

While there is a difference between “scale” of presentation (which refers to the logistics of the production) and “spectacle” which is content driven, there is necessarily slippage between the two that occurs by virtue of the specific condition of public address that occurs at a large-scale urban festival. The sheer size of the event requires the production of work that is easily viewed by masses of people in a short span of time to keep the flow of bodies constant. However,

because of this logistical requirement, works that are intended to be anti-spectacular potentially slip into the realm of “spectacle” simply because the way it is presented does not provide optimal conditions for prolonged meditation and privileges the instantaneous over the durational.

However, one final project noteworthy in the present discussion is Byron Kent Wong’s *the common and the tense, (a sound ecology)*, an open call submission (figure 11). Tucked away in an obscure courtyard, with only a small sign indicating its presence, the piece is easy to miss. However, the steady trickle of people moving into and out of the space suggests something happening. Once inside the courtyard the viewer encounters ethereal sounds and strange projections that shift and morph with the movements of the viewer’s body. As well, an upright piano is set up so that the audience can experiment with creating new sounds. Overall, the space was quite intimate, an effect of the enclosed space, the use of lighting and the sound ecology created by the artist and augmented by the audience. The capacity for play and exploration was an integral part of the project and resulted in a level of interaction between strangers that was not present at many other venues.<sup>14</sup>

The projects highlighted above are but three examples of the type of art that was presented at *Nuit Blanche, 2008*. Much more could be written on many other projects that would offer further illumination on how the festival and contemporary art might contribute to a healthy and inclusive public sphere. Suffice to say however, that while the three projects differed in approach with varying degrees of success, they all represented the particular responses of artists to the specific public sites where their work was to be staged.

### **Beyond one sleepless night**

At heart, the projects foreground the diversity of artistic explorations that are possible at *Nuit Blanche* and call for deeper thinking of how the work relates to the publics it hopes to address. The genius of *Nuit Blanche* is precisely in the diversity of possible ways that artists can communicate with the audience. This makes it ideally situated to aid in repopulating the public sphere with engaged citizens since the urban festival can be the space where political issues of public importance can be discussed in unexpected ways (thus thwarting the cynicism associated with the word “politics”). Further, *Nuit Blanche* can be where the possibility for play is explored, as according to Rancière, such possibility becomes a fundamental creative and political question that allows one to “discover how to produce forms for the presentation of objects, [and] forms for the organization of spaces, that thwart expectations. [For] the main enemy of artistic creativity as well as political creativity is consensus— that is, inscription within given roles, possibilities, competences” (Rancière in Carnevale, Kelsey, and Rancière, 2007, 263).

While it is apparent that there are a multitude of ways that artists can contribute to the strengthening of the public realm through their artistic interventions, the fact remains that within the context of the official *Nuit Blanche*, the curator ultimately acts as both cultural translator and gatekeeper of what will be presented. The decision of who to show, what is shown, and how the challenge of presenting contemporary art in response to city space is framed and interpreted, resides with the curator. As such, the curator plays a significant role in framing the conditions of public address at the festival.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, as the examples discussed above reveal, there is significant slippage between the intentions of both artists and curators. Recognizing this it is even more imperative that both artists and curators strive ever harder to discover the important discourses that are circulating in the public realm and make a commitment to use the specific space/time of the urban festival to address issues of social significance. *Nuit Blanche* is a night of spectacles, wonder, and excitement. But, it is also where the values of the *polis*, “the organization of the people as it arises out of acting and speaking together” are made manifest (Arendt in Iveson, 2007, 10). This festival is an opportunity for citizens to participate in a dialogue about what it means to be Torontonians.

Moreover, it can be the space/time where those who feel disenfranchised by the dominant narratives of the *creative city* can make themselves known to a city that, for at least one night, is in the streets, watching and listening. The spirit of *Nuit Blanche* speaks to the possibility of creating a more inclusive forum in the city for the discussion of *things public*. The legacy of *Nuit Blanche* is still to be determined, but socially minded artists, curators and citizens can play a significant role in determining whether this festival is just one more on the list of annual urban festivals, or instead, a catalyst, the starting point for creating a city that represents and includes all of its publics.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.scotiabanknuitblanche.com/eventHistory.shtml> (accessed on April 19, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> See Dragan Klaic "Festival." In Ric Allsopp and David Williams, D. (Eds.), *A Lexicon: Performance Research*, 11(3), 2006: 54-55.

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note that the producers of Toronto's *Nuit Blanche* (City of Toronto, Culture Division, Special Events Department) are well aware of the need to maintain a high standard of content. In an interview, they pointed out that there is a difference between *scale* and *spectacle* and were emphatically against the production of *spectacle* (personal interview with Special Events Programming Manager, Programming Team Leader, and Marketing Manager, April 14, 2009). Yet how to strike the right balance between presenting works at a proper *scale* to accommodate the multitudes while maintaining the integrity of the artistic content remains a process of negotiation and experimentation.

<sup>4</sup> This section will deal with the specific curatorial approaches taken for *Nuit Blanche 2008*, however, Dave Dymont, co-curator of Zone 'C' (east/west- Liberty Village) was unavailable for an interview at the time of writing therefore this discussion will be limited to the work of Gordon Hatt, Zone 'A' (downtown north), Wayne Baerwaldt, Zone 'B' (downtown south- financial district), and Haema Sivanesan, Zone 'C', (east/west- Liberty Village).

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix B for curatorial statements on *Nuit Blanche 2008*.

<sup>6</sup> Baerwaldt, currently director of the Illingworth Kerr Gallery in Calgary, was previously director of Toronto's Powerplant gallery of contemporary art as well as curator of art projects for the Toronto International Film Festival, and while he was the first *Nuit Blanche* curator not to physically reside in Toronto, he has much knowledge of Toronto's art and culture scene.

<sup>7</sup> Sivanesan was careful to point out that true diversity would mean not only showing works by South Asian artists, but artists across race, gender and class differences, through which a greater diversity of publics would feel welcome at such events.

<sup>8</sup> I am thinking here of Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonism and Jacques Rancière's notion of dissensus. See: Mouffe's *On the Political* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005) and Rancière's *On the Shores of Politics* (London, UK: Verso, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> To view the a video of the installation visit:

<http://www.ccca.ca/nuitblanche/nuitblanche2008/artists/b4m.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.woodgundy.com/wg/en/about-us/profilehistory.jsp> (accessed April 21, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> As a curatorial assistant for Zone 'B' at *Nuit Blanche 2008*, I assisted on both *Commerce Court* and *Project Business Class*.

<sup>12</sup> I stopped in at the installation at various times throughout the night, and even when viewers actively participated, they seemed quite lost as to what was supposed to happen and what the point of the exercise was.

<sup>13</sup> Curator Wayne Baerwaldt, as well as the Special Events team expressed their explicit concern that the work presented would be perceived as pure "spectacle" (personal interviews conducted April 2, 2009 and April 14, 2009 respectively).

<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the two exhibitions where I noticed a significant level of interaction between strangers was at Magnetic Laboratory's *Project Business Class* and Byron Kent Wong's *the common and the tense, (a sound ecology)*. While most festivalgoers tended to stay within their own groups these two projects managed to incite the audience to speak to people they clearly were unacquainted with. The cause for interaction was different for each however. People interacted at *Business Class* apparently out of a general sense of confusion, wanting to confirm

what they thought was happening whereas *the common and the tense* forged connections based on wonder and play, where interaction was more collaborative and experimental in how the audience could activate the artwork.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth reiterating here that while the curator's work is instrumental in the official exhibition there is much room for agency on the part of individuals and collectives who want to present art at the festival without official sanction.

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