

# Because the Night: Curating One-Off Nocturnal Events

TEXT / HELENA RECKITT

Since Paris established Nuit Blanche in 2002, the phenomenon of the one-off, late-night or all-night free public art event has spread across the world, from cities including Madrid, Riga, and Reykjavik to Tel Aviv, Santa Monica, and Toronto. Animating landmark districts and extending into marginal neighborhoods, these festive events showcase contemporary art with an emphasis on luminous visual spectacle and audience participation.

Mayor Bertrand Delanoë launched Nuit Blanche as part of a plan to reassert Paris' post-World War II reputation for artistic innovation. Urban centers inspired by the Paris event shared its ambition to brand or rebrand their particular cities. Lisbon's Luzboa festival, established in 2004, reimagines public space and rehabilitates unsafe or undesirable neighborhoods through light. Nuit Blanche in Toronto receives funding from the provincial cultural agency that was established to combat the negative impact of the SARS epidemic on tourism. The UK nationwide program Light Night aims to overcome some of the negative perceptions associated with the nighttime economy in many British city centers.<sup>1</sup> Although a more grassroots effort, Atlanta's Le Flash, from which the current Flux Night grew, has nonetheless played its part in urban rebranding. Launched in Castleberry Hill in 2008, when the neighborhood's identity was shifting from an arts quarter to a late-night bar district, the event has helped to reassert the area's cultural character. Whereas founders Cathy Byrd and Stuart Keeler established Le Flash on a bare-bones budget, Flux Night is now operated by the small but active arts organization Flux Projects. Funding comes from the collector and businessman Louis Corrigan and other private donors who wanted to demonstrate their faith in Atlanta's art scene and artists in the wake of the recession.

In an era of reduced arts funding, the huge audiences generated by these occasions have

attracted government as well as corporate and private support. Flux Night is set to entice some 15,000 people this October—an increase from 13,000 in 2012. Toronto's Nuit Blanche draws a million people, roughly a quarter of the city's population. It is particularly popular with young people and suburbanites, typically considered "hard to reach" art audiences.<sup>2</sup> As Toronto-based curator Jim Drobnick remarks, "Main-stream art institutions would kill for that kind of audience."<sup>3</sup> This dramatic demonstration of public interest in contemporary art was thrown into sharp relief in 2008, shortly after Stephen Harper's election as Canada's prime minister. In contrast to Harper's attack on the arts as "the province of elites" with no resonance for "ordinary people," crowds thronged the streets for Nuit Blanche. Dave Dyment, one of that year's curators, recalls people adding handwritten notes of gratitude and excitement to Yoko Ono's *Wish Tree*: "The messages were really touching and inspiring. Things like, 'I wish Stephen Harper could be here to see this.' The experience reinforced my sense that the arts, without condescension, could communicate to a broad audience."<sup>4</sup>

Not only does the public show up in droves for these nights, they also see themselves as part of the spectacle. They dress up—sometimes flamboyantly—equip themselves for the long night ahead, tweet, blog, and Facebook through the event, sharing recommendations of "must see" works, and post their pictures on Flickr and Instagram. These activities reinforce the sense that the audience is shaping the spectacle as much as consuming it. Guerrilla artworks and unauthorized projects proliferate, taking advantage of the crowds. Artists accompany or participate in their work, creating an informal relationship between themselves and the public. Gallery rules are jettisoned as visitors drink, get high, fall asleep, speak on their phones, and loudly express their opinions.

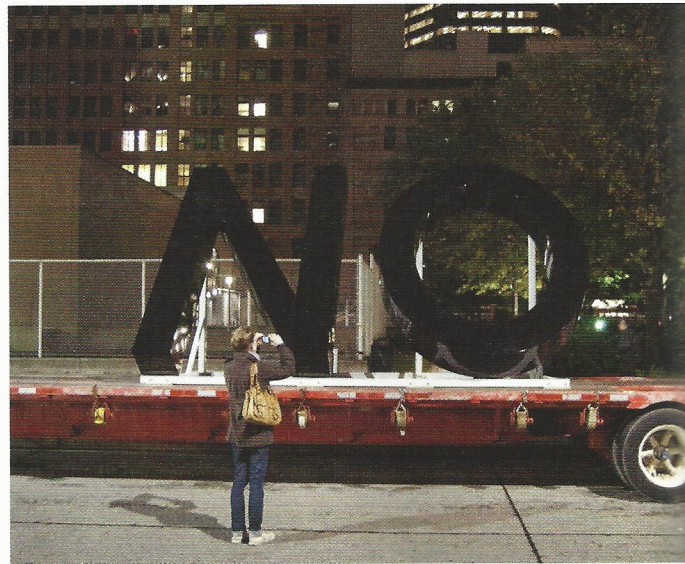
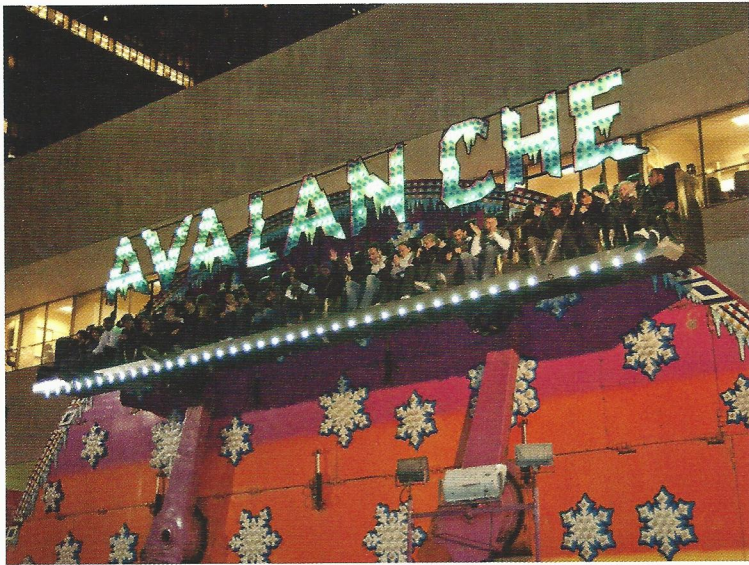
Audience participation in these events can take art projects in unanticipated directions. Dyment recalls the role reversal between audience and performers in a work he curated in 2008. For Jon Sasaki's *I Promise It Will Always Be This Way*, 26 colorfully costumed mascots danced in a sports arena to the sounds of upbeat pop anthems, attempting to whip the crowds into a frenzy. Both Dyment and Sasaki thought the plan would backfire and that the mascots would "be asleep on the field by 2 am." But the work took on a life of its own. In the absence of a team to support, the crowd chanted for the mascots. "Somehow the mascots mustered the energy to continue for the full 12 hours," Dyment recalls. "It was pretty fucking magical."<sup>5</sup>

While curators often cite the situationist notion of the *dérive*, "drifting" is nigh impossible in these tightly programmed, crowded occasions. With their emphasis on spectacle, luminosity, and interactivity, it is more accurate to discuss them in terms of what Google's Eric Schmidt calls the "attention economy," where "winners will be those who succeed in maximizing the number of 'eyeballs' they can consistently control."<sup>6</sup> The one-night-only premise creates an atmosphere of drama and urgency, requiring the expenditure of artistic and audience energy.

The festive, after-hours mood can take on carnivalesque dimensions. Curators Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher capitalized on this topsyturvy spirit in their NIGHTSENSE project for Toronto's financial district in 2009. Reflecting on the previous year's global economic crisis, Canadian artist Iain Baxter& led a game of *Monopoly with Real Money* in the Stock Exchange, the Canadian duo Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan installed carnival rides along the financial artery of Bay Street, and Spanish artist Santiago Sierra paraded a flatbed truck carrying the word "NO" in large black 3-D letters. Romanian artist Dan Mihaltianu's contribution

INSIDE FRONT COVER: Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky, installation view of *All Night Convenience*, 2012, lanterns: acetate, LED lights, tape; structure: acrylic, aluminum, 10 x 12 x 21 feet [image courtesy of the artists] / OPPOSITE, TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan, *Wild Ride*, 2009, performance stills of one of two carnival rides installed on Bay Street from NIGHTSENSE (2009), curated by DisplayCult for Zone B of Nuit Blanche, Toronto; Santiago Sierra, *No*, 2009, installation on Temperance Street from NIGHTSENSE (2009), curated by DisplayCult for Zone B of Nuit Blanche, Toronto [photos: Paul Litherland; courtesy of DisplayCult] / MIDDLE, LEFT AND RIGHT: Rhonda Weppler and Trevor Mahovsky, installation view of *All Night Convenience*, 2012, lanterns: acetate, LED lights, tape; structure: acrylic, aluminum, 10 x 12 x 21 feet [images courtesy of the artists] / BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT: Dan Mihaltianu, *Vodka Pool*, 2009, installation in the CIBC bank atrium at Commerce Court from NIGHTSENSE (2009), curated by DisplayCult for Zone B of Nuit Blanche, Toronto [image courtesy of the artist and DisplayCult]; Center for Tactical Magic, *Witches' Cradles*, 2009, performance stills at Brookfield Place from NIGHTSENSE (2009), curated by DisplayCult for Zone B of Nuit Blanche, Toronto [photo: Paul Litherland; courtesy of DisplayCult]







was a reflecting pool made from vodka. Intended as a meditative piece, it proved unexpectedly provocative. "Alcoholic fumes may have contributed to the frenzy as people threw in pennies, boats made from paper money, house keys, and even condoms, as if the work were a kind of ersatz wishing well," Drobnick and Fisher note. "Eventually, dogs and stripped-down individuals hurled themselves through the placid, aqueous pool, and at one point the installation had to be closed by security because of a near riot. By the end of the night, the volume of coins surpassed that of the vodka, oddly mimicking the public money surrendered to banks and corporations during the previous year's bailout."<sup>7</sup>

Tapping into ancient rituals, the festival model marks the change of seasons and the community's survival. Such rhetoric prompts concerns that expressions of celebration and conviviality are promoted over those of criticism and dissent, resulting in safe, sponsor-friendly art. Critics remark on the closeness of "creative city" rhetoric to these once-only or annual time-based events' emphasis on youth, innovation, and technology. The interests of property developers and urban boosters find expression in projects that animate buildings or transform undesirable nonplaces and districts. Liberal ideas about art's ability to heal and unite communities are bolstered by the focus on participation and interaction. The very metaphor of illuminating the night invokes dubious arguments about art and moral uplift, connotations that arts policy scholar Max Haiven finds unavoidably colonial. Yet while Haiven criticizes the neoliberal agendas that underscore such endeavors, he accepts the need to take events like Toronto's Nuit Blanche and Halifax's Nocturne seriously. "To dismiss the potential of dream-like events like Nocturne is dangerous. To fail to seize it is, unfortunately, all too easy."<sup>8</sup>

The relatively large budgets commandeered by one-off events have also prompted criticism. Paris-based curator Eva Svennung has attacked Nuit Blanche as consuming "most of the city's annual budget in an orgiastic one-night stand of art in the streets—a populist intercourse ready-made for live broadcast on public television."<sup>9</sup> In less-developed art scenes, questions regularly emerge about whether funds being channeled to ephemeral art projects could be better used to strengthen a city's cultural infrastructure and sustainability.

These critiques aside, ephemeral civic events have received little in-depth scholarly attention, especially from art critics and academics. Popularity coupled with populist agendas make them subject to art world and academic snobbery. I was advised by an academic colleague not

to include Nuit Blanche in my outputs for the upcoming UK university Research Excellence Framework (REF), as it was only of "local" interest. Drobnick and Fisher responded to the academic neglect of ephemeral urban events by editing a 2012 issue of the journal *PUBLIC* on civic spectacle. Such further analysis is welcome, not least because of the particular challenges and questions that curating such events pose. Will a thematic approach create a sense of curatorial coherence or end up becoming overly prescriptive and limiting (a particularly relevant concern when, as with Atlanta's Flux Night, most artworks are selected blind, from open-call proposals)? What is gained by presenting an artwork in public, short of making it big, bright, and eye-catching? In addition to paying attention to the weather, crowd control, and community advocacy, curators must consider whether a piece can be experienced by large numbers of people and its meaning grasped without the need for explanatory texts. There are permits and permissions to seek, roads to close, electricity to source, lights to install or arrange to switch off. With little time to install or test-run projects, technical issues must be carefully anticipated.

The popularity of these programs often leads cities to adopt them as annual events. This can lead to a situation in which such occasions become victims of their own success. Crowd management and safety require extra budget and labor, as do the provision of refreshments, toilets, and transport. Inertia or outright hostility can set in amongst arts aficionados who complain that bureaucratic concerns and corporate interests have usurped the initial spirit of experimentation. In Toronto the city organizers attempt to keep Nuit Blanche fresh by inviting several different curators each year, including those working independently and in artist-run spaces, and offering them commissioning budgets and relative creative freedom. Nonetheless, Toronto artist An Te Liu's neon work *Ennui Blanc*, installed in a storefront gallery during the 2010 event, wittily captured the ambivalence of some residents. Artists who make ostensibly participatory art have started to incorporate elements of critique into their work. Observing artists' projects in Toronto and Halifax, Haiven identified "the whiff of laconic nonchalance among many would-be 'public' artists, as if they want the audience to know that they know no-one believes in art's transformative power [any more], as if to preempt the presumption of over-earnest effort or intention."<sup>10</sup> In 2012 Jon Sasaki offered his artist fee to the member of the public who was able to stand all night with their hands resting on a van. *Hands on the Van* queries the terms of participation offered by so much contemporary event-based public art.

When I was invited to curate Nuit Blanche Toronto in 2012, I was aware of these competing views. Having attended the event since its inception, I missed the first night's exuberance and adventurousness and had wearied of spending long periods lining up for projects that took only a few minutes to see. I had reached the conclusion that, valuable though Nuit Blanche was, it wasn't really designed for people like me who were in, or with regular access to, contemporary art. Maybe I was just too old. In my zone, *One More With Feeling*, I wanted to ask how an annual public event could be done again, with a difference. All of the works I featured performed loops of repetition and feedback, highlighted cycles of recurrence and renewal while suggesting the possibility of revolt. I chose them for the insight they offered into what it means to encounter art in large groups of people, how that experience heightens an awareness of our common bodies and identities as well as our being common with others.

The event's temporal frame provided a context for international musician and artist Susan Stenger's audio work *The Structures of Everyday Life: Full Circle*. The piece took listeners through a 12-hour cycle that evoked the passage of dusk to dawn as chords swelled and receded, soared and subsided again. Installed in a bandstand in James Park, the previous home of Occult Toronto, it was welcomed by protestors as a tribute to their struggle. *The Structures of Everyday Life* proved unexpectedly interactive. At 3 a group of performing arts high school students used it to stage an impromptu a cappella rendition of Carly Rae Jepsen's maddeningly contagious pop song "Call Me Maybe."

With the budget assigned for a "monumental work" that "will make the audience gasp," I invited the Trisha Brown Dance Company to restage a little-seen work from 1968 called *Planes*.<sup>11</sup> Dancers scaled a façade in a corporate courtyard, accompanied by 16 mm film projections of Vietnam War footage by Jud Yalkut and a vacuum cleaner soundtrack by Simone I. Satisfying the need for visual impact while resisting the demand for dazzling spectacle, it overwhelms the viewer's subjectivity, thus eschewed virtuosity to celebrate pared-down everyday movements.

A work by UK-based collaborators Matthew Brennan and Ruth Ewan called *Tremolo* mentioned the event's emphasis on duration and performance. Brennan, an accomplished pianist who suffers from debilitating stage fright, played a series of piano recitals throughout the night. Audiences at the Rainbow Cinema watched attentively, not knowing if they would experience professional playing, faulty playing, or not playing at all. *Tremolo* became an unexp





hit, perhaps because the artist's struggle against exhaustion and anxiety resonated with the audience's efforts to stay awake.

Beyond the buildings or the site, the unanticipated social interactions at such events are their most exciting aspect for a curator. Experiencing art amongst thousands of other people, one can feel both part of a group while also deeply alienated from it. I am interested in projects that invite, rather than coerce, social participation. For Atlanta's Flux Night I am curating six projects that aim to activate the public in different ways.<sup>12</sup> Having lived in Atlanta, I understand the importance and vulnerability of public space in a car-centric, sprawling city with a history of segregation. So the prospect of mixing and mingling at street level is one that I take seriously.

With the curatorial theme of "Free Association," I want to see what kinds of unexpected encounters can occur at a nocturnal event when our normal habits are overturned. Making art addressed to a broad audience is, as Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky remark, "a risk, and a hopeful thing."<sup>13</sup> The Canadian duo will remake their 2012 work *All Night Convenience*, a glowing store containing lanterns modeled on everyday packaged goods, which visitors are invited to take home. As the store empties, the public distributes the work, with the lanterns illuminating and spreading out through the streets like fireflies. Adapted for its southern setting, the work will include offerings such as boiled peanuts, rutabaga, and collard greens.

Several planned works will tap into Atlanta's history, staging a conversation with its past to

reimagine its present and future. The London-based Open Music Archive will work with local DJs, MCs, and producers to remix songs recorded in the city between 1929 and 1932. Originally anonymously authored, these tunes and lyrics were privatized in the process of being recorded and subjected to copyright laws. Releasing these songs back into public in a live, open mic event, the artists anticipate their free playback and reuse. Toronto artist Deanna Bowen will work with civil rights-era audio recordings made in Atlanta by ABC's Southern bureau chief, Paul Good, in the mid-1960s. She will provide a platform for the audience to add their memories of those events.

London artist Heather Phillipson is devising a "live" equivalent of a video, a montage of images and sound through which the audience will move. In addition to being excited by the prospect of making work for a city that she has not yet visited and for a site that pushes her to think beyond her gallery practice, Phillipson is intrigued by Flux Night's evocation of festivals and free parties. "Nighttime does something strange and interesting not only to our senses but also to our social engagement," she remarks. "It's the ultimate readymade darkspace—upside-down and intimate: we're here together, after bedtime, for a reason."<sup>14</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Salim Jiwa, J. Andres Coca-Stefaniak, Martin Blackwell, Toyubur Rahman, "Light Night: an 'enlightening' place marketing experience," *Journal of Place Management and Development* 2, no. 2 (2009): 154–166.
2. Julian Sleuth, "Interview Guide: Business Plan for Nu: Blanche North," undated, unpaginated document sent to the author, April 2013.
3. Jim Drobnick, Skype conversation with the author, April 2013.
4. Dave Dymont, e-mail to the author, April 2013.
5. Ibid.
6. Heather Diack, "Sleepless Nights: Contemporary Art and the Culture of Performance," in "Civic Spectacle," ed. Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, special issue, *PUBLIC* 45, no. 23 (Spring 2012): 11.
7. Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, "NIGHTSENSE," in "Civic Spectacle," *ibid.*: 51.
8. Max Haiven, "Halifax's Nocturne Versus (?) the Spectacle of Neoliberal Civics," "Civic Spectacle," *ibid.*: 91.
9. Quoted by Diack in "Sleepless Nights," *ibid.*: 19.
10. Haiven, *ibid.*: 89.
11. Julian Sleuth, *Interview Guide*, *ibid.*
12. The six projects I am curating are by Deanna Bowen, Pablo Bronstein, Oswaldo Maciá, the Open Music Archive, Heather Phillipson, and Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky. In addition, the Flux Projects committee is selecting works submitted via Open Call, a process that I only partly participated in.
13. Rhonda Wepler and Trevor Mahovsky, e-mail to the author, April 2013.
14. Heather Phillipson, e-mail to the author, April 2013.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Rebecca Belmore, *Gone Indian*, 2009, performance at the Royal Bank Plaza; FASTWÜRMS, *Skry-Pod*, 2009, performance in the courtyard of the Sheraton Centre Hotel; both from NIGHTSENSE (2009), curated by DisplayCult for Zone B of Nuit Blanche, Toronto [photos: Paul Litherland; courtesy of DisplayCult]