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The Visuality of Scenes

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TORONTO'S NUIT BLANCHE: SITE-SPECIFICITY, SPECTACLE, AND SPECTATORSHIP

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Résumé

Cet article examine les tendances visuelles des œuvres exposées au fil des ans à la Nuit Blanche de Toronto par rapport à l'évolution de la scène sociale et de ses spectateurs urbains. Depuis la création de l'événement en 2006, l'art in situ (site-specific art) a cédé du terrain. Les œuvres in situ sont dédiées à certains quartiers de Toronto. Cette méthode artistique tient compte des aspects physiques de la ville, mais aussi des aspects culturels, sociaux, et de l'histoire politique des sites locaux environnants. À la place, l'accent a été mis sur des œuvres d'art qui tirent parti de l'aspect spectaculaire de la Nuit Blanche de Toronto. Ces œuvres d'art spectaculaires attirent l'attention sur une esthétique de la nuit urbaine de façon exagérée alors que les lumières artificielles brillent intensément dans l'obscurité de la nuit. Parallèlement, il y a eu un changement dans les types d'interaction sociale anticipés et adoptés par les spectateurs qui assistent à la Nuit Blanche. Les conversations critiques des premières années ont fait place à une effervescence populaire générale née des incarnations plus récentes. En s'appuyant sur les propos de Nicolas Bourriaud qui affirme dans Esthétique relationnelle que « l'art est un lieu qui produit une sociabilité spécifique », cet article explore la relation entre les œuvres exposées à la Nuit Blanche de Toronto et les sociabilités politiques qui les entourent. Il fait valoir qu'alors que la Nuit Blanche de Toronto lutte entre le spectaculaire et le in situ, ce sont les spectateurs qui sont devenus de plus en plus influents lorsqu'il est question de l'avenir de l'événement.

Abstract

This article examines the visual trends in artworks exhibited over the years at Toronto's Nuit Blanche in relation to the changing social scene of urban spectatorship. Since its inception in 2006, there has been a noticeable shift away from site-specific art that captures the visual flavour of particular areas of Toronto—that is, art that not only engages with the city's physical features but also with the cultural, social, and political histories of its surrounding local sites. Instead, there has been a move towards popular artworks by predominately international artists that capitalize on a sense of the spectacular. These spectacular artworks call attention to themselves with their monumental size and their exaggerated aestheticization of artificial lights which illuminate the darkness of night. At the same time, there has been a similar change in the kinds of social interaction expected and enacted by spectators attending Nuit Blanche. The critical conversations of the early years have given way to the generalized popular party

buzz of more recent incarnations. Following the claim by Nicolas Bourriaud in Relational Aesthetics that “art is a site that produces specific sociability,” this article teases out a relationship between the artworks exhibited at Toronto's Nuit Blanche and the politics of sociability that surround them. It argues that as the event continues to favour the spectacular, the cost is its relationship to the site-specific, in that the overall event has not maintained a good balance between the two. So while this produces tension with and between spectacular and site-specific artworks displayed at Nuit Blanche, this article explores how the event's social scene is much more dynamic and unpredictable. Spectators are able to negotiate the artistic landscape in deciding what they want to see and do, and they have therefore risen to occupy an increasingly significant role at Toronto's Nuit Blanche through their ability to choose customised combinations of the spectacular and the site-specific.

For more than a decade the city of Toronto has played host to Nuit Blanche, a free all-night contemporary art event. Each year, on a crisp October evening, the contemporary art scene collides with the urban nighttime scene when the public is invited to see artworks staged within the city at night. As a young Torontonians interested in contemporary art, I have continued to attend the event as a spectator over the years. Outdoor public spaces are transformed by artists' installations, and indoor cultural institutions such as museums and galleries stay open all night. The celebration—also known as the “sleepless night,” the “white night,” (Benne 32) or the “light night” (Evans 45)—foregrounds the tensions and contradictions inherent in the event, which unites sleep and sleeplessness and darkness and light. While those attending the event continue to experience “less sleep, more art”

(nbto.com), it is the artworks and the crowds themselves that are becoming bigger, brighter, and more spectacular with each coming year.

This article examines the visual trends in artworks exhibited over the years at Toronto's Nuit Blanche in relation to the changing social scene of urban spectatorship. Since its inception in 2006, there has been a noticeable shift away from site-specific art that captures the visual flavour of particular areas of Toronto—that is, art that not only engages with the city's physical features but also with the cultural, social, and political histories of its surrounding local sites. Instead, there has been a move towards popular artworks by predominately international artists, which capitalize on a sense of the spectacular. These spectacular artworks call attention to themselves with their monumental size and their exaggerated aestheticization of artificial lights which illuminate the darkness of night. At the same time, there has been a similar change in the kinds of social interaction expected and enacted by spectators attending Nuit Blanche, as the critical conversations of the early years have given way to the generalized popular party buzz

of more recent incarnations. Following the claim by Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* that “art is a site that produces specific sociability” (161), I aim here to tease out a relationship between the artworks at Toronto's Nuit Blanche and the politics of sociability that surround them. I argue that as the event continues to favour the spectacular, the cost is its relationship to the site-specific, in that the overall event has not maintained a good balance between the two. So while this produces tension with and between spectacular and site-specific artworks displayed at Nuit Blanche, the event's social scene is much more dynamic and unpredictable. Spectators are able to negotiate the artistic landscape in deciding what they want to see and do, and they have therefore risen to occupy an increasingly significant role at Toronto's Nuit Blanche through their ability to choose customised combinations of the spectacular and the site-specific.

* * * * *

In 2002, the first ever Nuit Blanche was held in Paris, France. Proposed by Mayor Bertrand Delanoë and Deputy Mayor Christophe Girard, Nuit Blanche was inspired by the popularity of late-night museum openings and extended evening hours (Benne 32; Evans 44). Nuit Blanche, however, stood apart from these previously established late-night art events because it brought art outside the museum walls, and let it spill out onto public streets. Since its inception in Paris, Nuit Blanche has expanded beyond Europe, growing into a popular, globalized phenomenon. In 2006, Toronto became the first city in North America to host a Nuit Blanche, with personnel from both France and Canada working closely together to translate the essence of the Parisian event (MacGregor 13). Major Nuit Blanche events are now held in Montréal, New York, Chicago, Rome, Madrid, and Melbourne (“Nuit Blanche: International Network”). Each city produces its own interpretation of the Nuit Blanche mandate, which characterizes the event as follows:

At its core, Nuit Blanche is 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 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. Cultural institutions, from museums to galleries to artist run

centres, open their doors and offer free access to contemporary art. The everyday is suspended as the city’s landscape is changed to welcome a variety of artistic experiences. (“Nuit Blanche: International Network”)

A close reading of the international mandate captures the *scene* at Nuit Blanche as one structured by competing intentions. Here, the notion of a scene may be understood in two ways: as a visual phenomenon, which is to be looked at and seen (in the way that a painting is “seen”); and as something social, defined by the ways in which people interact, converse, and engage with each other and their environment. Each of these senses of a scene brings its own specific tension. The works presented within Nuit Blanche are often subject to the critique that contemporary high art forms are overly conceptual and academic, prioritizing idea over appearance. When visibility is foregrounded, by contrast, the art may be criticized for being too spectacular, too popular, and too easy to digest. The social scene at Nuit Blanche is likewise fractured between a sense that the public should engage critically with the specificities of site, and the countervailing notion that Nuit Blanche is a celebration in which the public should be entertained by the new, spectacular, and oneiric possibilities that the urban night may offer. In the history of Nuits Blanches, it can be said that site-specific artworks are the focus of site-specific sociabilities, just as spectacular artworks generate a sense of urban sociability itself as spectacle.

Site-specificity

Against the dark backdrop of the urban night, each artwork serves as a scene within the larger theatrical performance that is Nuit Blanche. Early iterations of the event in Toronto featured a small number of artworks along with a cast of artists and curators who came together in order to explore a variety of sites within the city: districts, regions, neighbourhoods, and communities. The first of these zones, in 2006, were Yorkville, Queen Street West, and University/Spadina Avenue. Each featured commissioned artworks selected by well-respected, seasoned curators who were from Toronto and familiar with these areas on a personal level, often as residents (MacGregor 13-4). Local artist Gwen MacGregor explains that “in the first few years [Nuit Blanche] was largely based on the prioritization of creativity...curators and local artists were given considerable autonomy to produce site-specific artworks of their own imagining” (7). During these years, artworks tended to hang together like constellations: they were clearly linked by their engagement with the thematic narrative set by their zone’s respective curators, but also tied together in the ways that they drew meaning from their surrounding area. Many artists conceived their works in relation to physical, architectural spaces, and a majority of the artworks also engaged conceptually with the local character of an area, its issues and histories.

These kinds of artworks, featured predominately during the early years of Toronto’s Nuit Blanche, are emblematic of site-specific art as conceptualized by

Suzanne Lacy and Miwon Kwon. According to Kwon, it is possible “to conceive [of] the site as something more than a place”; it can also be a social, cultural, political, or historical framework, therefore exceeding its physicality in favour of a more abstract notion of a “site” (96). Lacy theorizes along similar lines, drawing out the difference between “public art,” where art is simply located in a public space, and “site-specific art” (or what she calls “new genre public art”), where art encourages dialogue with the space and the people who circulate within it (19). Lacy’s notion of “site-specific art” proposes a more nuanced practice of art in public places. It allows for the production of knowledge about its location, as “artists [turn] their attention to the historical, ecological, and sociological aspects of the site” (Lacy 23). Lacy further explains that not only do such artworks engage with the charged histories, ideas, and issues tied to a particular physical place, but that they also, by extension, interact with those who occupy the space, engaging with the public’s diverse identities and opinions (20). This opens up site-specific art to the cross-disciplinary network of contemporary art practices—such as participatory art and relational aesthetics—whose focus has become the situational relationship between the artist, artwork, and audience. In this context, while the early artworks at *Nuit Blanche* were rooted in developments characteristic of contemporary art, they were also intimately connected to their surrounding local communities.

One work exemplifying site-specific art at Toronto’s *Nuit Blanche* is Rebecca Belmore’s *Gone Indian* (Fig.1), presented at the 2009 festival. In Toronto’s financial

district, Belmore performed a series of live scenes that addressed the history of colonial violence enacted across First Nation land and against Indigenous women. The performance began with a van – embellished with animal hides, feathers, and living-room furniture adorned on its roof – which drove up and parked on the plaza of the headquarters for the Royal Bank of Canada. Belmore, of Anishinaabe descent, then entered and honoured the space with sage and sweetgrass. She was followed by Cree actor/choreographer Michael Greyeyes, in full regalia, who danced and sang to a mix of pow-wow and hip-hop music (Fig.1a). For the rest of the piece, Belmore proceeded to deface “the \$500 [worth of pennies] strewn on the plaza” (Fisher and Drobnick 40) by grinding them into pulverized bits of metal, which audience members were invited to pick up and keep (Fig.1b).



Fig. 1a & 1b - Rebecca Belmore, *Gone Indian*, 2009. Images courtesy of Paul Litherland.

to this treatment of Indigenous women through the highly visceral and embodied defacement of pennies. She consciously invoked her location, in the heart of Toronto's financial district, to comment on the value of the lives of Indigenous women. Belmore drew a parallel between the physical abuse performed on the bronze pennies and the violence enacted against the Indigenous women in this production of bronze surfaces: damaged and deformed, broken and bruised, and then left abandoned in the streets. Invited to take the damaged pennies, the surrounding public was turned into participants and became intimately connected to Belmore's performance. After picking the pennies up, people dispersed the pieces of her art throughout the city and even brought them into their homes. As a metaphor for violence against Indigenous women, each individual penny offers the potential—and the hope—that it will serve as a small yet constant reminder to transform and expand our perceptions about how we value the lives of Indigenous women.

Site-specific artworks, such as Belmore's, are deeply characterized by the emotions and relationships that are evoked rather than by their aesthetic appearances alone, giving way to an eclectic collection of visual scenes during the early years of Toronto's Nuit Blanche. The wide variety of site-specific artworks exhibited at the festival incorporated a range of materials, forms, and techniques so to visually highlight what each artist perceived as the most significant or interesting aspect of the spaces and places that they occupied. As such, there were some works that were durational, some that were based in live performance, others that

were interactive, and a few that were even immersive. Several works, such as Belmore's, used a number of these artistic practices in combination. Despite differences in outward appearances, these artworks all shared a thematic thread faithful to their zone's curatorial premise, and they all drove to engage with specific frameworks offered by their sites. As an ensemble, the artworks in a particular zone offered inclusive, pluralistic, and multidimensional visual narratives about their surrounding area. They came together as individual units that interacted, connected, and clashed with one another. The overall effect was not a single unifying aesthetic, but rather a series of relationships that might be conceptualized using the language of networks, nodes, and clusters. Together, these artworks unfolded in the darkness like stars in a constellation, images in a collage, or scenes in a play—each one unique, but coming together to create a much larger picture and overall story.

The parallels between Toronto's Nuit Blanche and the theatre extend beyond the analogy of artwork to visual scene, pushing us into the realm of the social. According to Jacques Rancière, theatre is the art form most marked by the romantic association with revolution (6). From Greek antiquity through the Elizabethan period and into the present, the theatre provides a communal space in which a public may watch, listen, and offer commentary on current events. Although it does not hold the power to change the state or its laws directly, Rancière argues that theatre has the potential to transform social perspectives and practices through its direct eliciting of collective

emotional experiences within an audience (6). The associated emotions and attitudes then lend themselves to specific models of sociability (Bourriaud 168). In its early years, Nuit Blanche played into this transformative relationship between the theatre and its audience, art and the public, and visual scene and social scene. The exhibition of site-specific art across the city stage endowed Toronto's Nuit Blanche with the potential to produce a social scene in which the public audience became more directly engaged, through art, with its neighbourhoods, communities, and local spaces. Site-specific artworks thrived on generating visual, emotional, and critical engagements with and between the people and places around them. In this way, the early incarnations of Toronto's Nuit Blanche actively fulfilled one of the tenets of its International Mandate, by "inspiring dialogue and engaging the public to examine its significance and impact on public space."

Spectacle

If we fast-forward to almost a decade after its inception, both the social and visual scenes that mark Toronto's Nuit Blanche have changed drastically: everything has become bigger and brighter. The crowd has grown from 425,000 attendees in its first year (most of them Torontonians), to a low estimate of 1.2 million in 2013, with more international visitors coming every year ("Nuit Blanche Toronto: Event History"). Another sign of this expansion is that while Toronto's Nuit Blanche exhibited 27 art projects in

its first year, it has featured upwards of 150 artworks during more recent iterations (“Nuit Blanche Toronto: Event History”). The artworks themselves have also become monumentally spectacular. Their enlarged scales and striking bright lights have enhanced their appeal to cameras, but have also made them easier for the ever-expanding crowds to see from a distance. The majority of artworks are now placed in strategic locations downtown and squeezed into dense curatorial zones that are located along TTC lines to relieve traffic congestion and encourage public transit. While the exhibition zones have shifted away from areas of local character, the artworks themselves have tended to become less invested in the specificity of site. Despite still being located within city spaces, the majority of the artworks exhibited during Toronto’s Nuit Blanche in recent years have manifest an increasingly superficial engagement (Lacy 23) with their surrounding areas, using the city and its infrastructure as a mere backdrop or convenient place in which to showcase flashier, more accessible art (Lippard 157). According to MacGregor, these changes demonstrate that “rather than thinking of how to change the audience and the way it interacted with the work, the decision was made to change the artwork to accommodate the audience” (17). Nuit Blanche now entails going out to see the spectacles of illuminated visual displays and the growing urban crowds that surround them.

Fig. 2. Yvette Mattern, *Global Rainbow*, 2014.
Image courtesy of Zach Slootsky.





Fig. 3. Director X, *Death of the Sun*, 2016.
Image courtesy of Ben Roffelsen.

The visual scene at Toronto's Nuit Blanche has been transformed into one that plays into the aesthetic spectacle of the city at night. As the sun sinks below the horizon and its natural light melts into the darkness, it is the nocturnal world of artificial and electric lights and colours that is turned on (Batchelor, "The Luminous and the Grey" 35). With the flick of hundreds of switches, the artworks at Nuit Blanche are brought to life in an array of luminous colours. Clusters of glowing, radiant, and iridescent artworks mark the city stage, lit up from above and below, in front and in back, and even from within. Some artworks have consisted of light projections that shoot images onto the city's surfaces or screens, while others have pointed flashing colour lights onto artistic sculptures. For example, Director X's *Death of the Sun* (2016) (Fig. 3) involved a video projection in which the sun's 12-billion-year evolution was condensed into a 12-minute work, displayed on a massive 14-metre 3D globe of a screen (Siekierska, *The Toronto Star*, "Nuit Blanche Exhibit Dominates Nathan Phillips Square"). Another example is Ai Weiwei's sculpture, *Forever Bicycles* (2013) (Fig. 6), which consisted of 3,144 interconnected bicycles illuminated by mood-lighting that gradually changed colour ("Nuit Blanche: Ai Weiwei"). There are also artworks which have imitated the vividly intense luminescent LCD or LED screens. Project Blinkenlights's *Stereoscope* (Fig. 4) placed lights behind all 960 windows at City Hall so that each glass pane became one pixel in a kaleidoscope of ever-changing animations. This piece effectively transformed the entire front of the building into the "world's largest interactive computer screen," which

was programmed to interact with the Nuit Blanche smartphone app (blinkenlights.net/stereoscope). A couple of works have reflected the lights around them, such as Jeff Koons's monumental *Rabbit Balloon* (2009) at the Toronto Eaton Centre (Fig. 5). Its shiny, metallic and inflated silver surface bounced and amplified the lights that surrounded it, like an overblown version of those fun-house mirrors commonly found at carnivals. Some of the artworks have even used light itself as a medium, such as Yvette Mattern's *Global Rainbow* (2014) (Fig. 2), which transmitted seven beams of coloured light from the CN Tower (Wheeler, *The Globe and Mail*, "Twenty Spectacular Things").

These spectacular artworks exhibit a clear, unifying, visual theme in their striking display of lights and luminous colours: the aestheticization of the city's night-time lights. If Nuit Blanche were required to select one visual strategy that might symbolize the nocturnal event, this aestheticization would clearly stand as most appropriate. The artificial illumination of such artworks speaks to their temporary existence in the city, in that they are seen on only one date out of the entire calendar year. The capacity to turn them off and on dictates yet another condition, setting a time-frame in which they may be experienced, further contributing to their fleeting yet brilliant existence (Batchelor, "The Luminous and the Grey" 49-50). The occasion of seeing these impermanent artworks therefore makes for an especially ephemeral nocturnal event (Batchelor, "The Luminous and the Grey" 52).

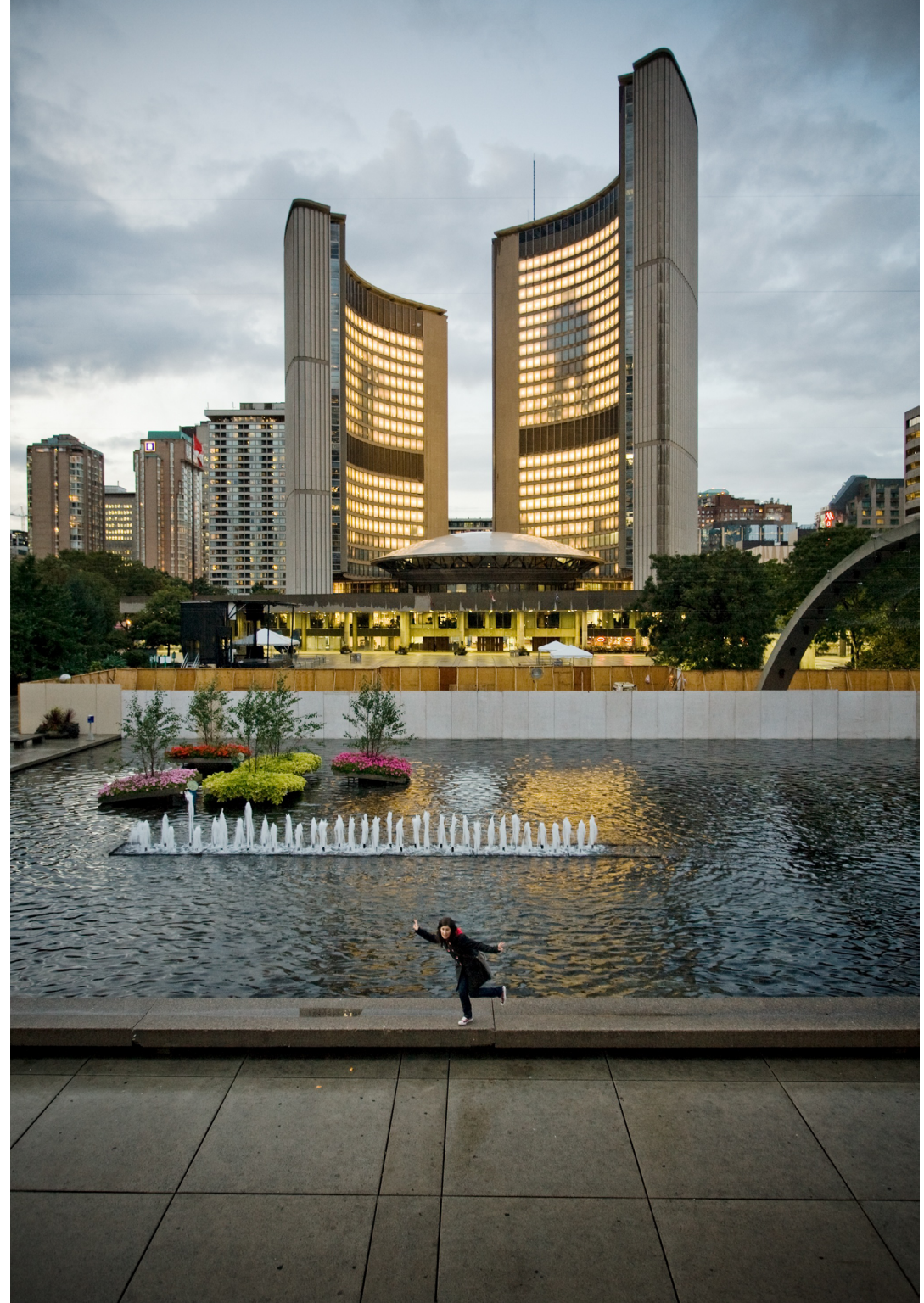
In carving out a distinctive visual scene, Nuit Blanche stands apart from other contemporary art events worldwide. However, its escalating emphasis on the visually spectacular is a double-edged sword. While a string of spectacular artworks at Nuit Blanche brings a visual cohesiveness to the event, it simultaneously tends to decrease its overall cultural credibility: Toronto artist Gwen MacGregor has passionately argued that while the event continues to adjust its program to accommodate what is popular—here interpreted as the visually spectacular—Nuit Blanche has not given "equal attention to increasing its 'cultural capital' [and so] the festival is losing credibility within the cultural field and is hitting the 'tipping point'" (MacGregor 31). Toronto's Nuit Blanche has been compared to the kinds of biennales and art festivals that are held outside of a museum context, yet its later iterations have been generally dismissed as purely populist renditions of such contemporary art events (Leah Sandals, *Canadian Art*, "10 Thoughts"). This is due, in part, to the fact that spectacular art does not necessarily depend upon an appreciation of its conceptual dimensions; it can be meaningful on the basis of its visual appearance alone, rendering it easily accessible and popular amongst members of the general public. In further adding to the sense of urban spectacle, Toronto's Nuit Blanche has shifted the exhibition spaces to high tourism areas, such as City Hall's Nathan Phillips Square and the Eaton Centre. So instead of engaging intimately with the local character of Toronto, the artworks at Nuit Blanche tend to decorate areas that are stereotypically "Torontonians" for an international audience and stage. As a result, Nuit Blanche in Toronto has become

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increasingly touristy rather than artsy, a sentiment echoed by Canadian professors Laura Levin and Kim Solga who have expressed that “the event that is Nuit Blanche [is beginning to] eclipse the artworks” exhibited (48-9).

The artworks themselves tend to bleed and blur together, as the majority of pieces now exhibited at Toronto’s Nuit Blanche are of a spectacular nature. The curatorial zones no longer appear distinct from one another as they often overlap in space, congregating in the downtown core, but also in time, in the sense that it becomes difficult to differentiate their visual and thematic approaches from year to year. As a result, Nuit Blanche becomes less like a series of distinct constellations, in which artworks are linked by a compelling curatorial theme; and instead it becomes more like one massive globular cluster, where all of the artworks are competing within a confined space to shine the brightest. In this way, the artworks exhibited during the later years are more strongly unified by their aesthetic appearances, rather than by their connections to a curatorial theme or an awareness of the site-specific space around them.

David Batchelor’s *Chromophobia* explores the ways in which bright, luminous, neon colours have become associated with drug culture and hallucination (43), offering a highly suggestive framework in which to theorize Nuit Blanche’s shift towards more spectacular visualities and sociabilities. Such vibrant and luminous colours have repeatedly come to stand in as a visual metaphor for alternative dream states, as with Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, or for drugs, as exemplified by Aldous Huxley’s writings about LSD (Batchelor, “Luminous and the Grey” 26; Huxley 6-7). Batchelor points out that colour has had a deep association with drugs since antiquity when painters were described as “grinder[s] and mixer[s] of multi-coloured



drugs” (“Chromophobia” 31). Since then, colours have become increasingly industrialized and artificial, so much so that their illuminated and electric versions are vibrant to the point of vulgarity (Batchelor, “Luminous and the Grey” 48-9). Spectacles of illumination are often excessive and chaotic; their lights flash and flicker, their colours blink and bleed, and a common effect is one of intoxication (Batchelor, “Chromophobia” 32). With the increase in spectacularly illuminated artworks, Toronto’s Nuit Blanche unfolds within a late-night timeframe that easily lends itself to the spectacle of urban sociability, filled with dreamers and drunks alike.

Spectacular artworks and their vibrant aesthetics are particularly seductive through the filter of a camera or through the intoxication of drugs. Amongst the hordes of people attending Nuit Blanche, it appears to me that fewer and fewer are engaged with each other, or with the artworks, in an active and direct way. In wandering the streets of Toronto during the most recent Nuit Blanche, the distinctive scents of alcohol and marijuana wafting through the air have become common. In addition, I have observed that the majority of people experience the event and its artwork through the screens of their smartphones, in what might be seen as a form of passive participation. In fact, over the years, a growing number of news reports claim that the social scene at Nuit Blanche has become one of urban spectacle, filled with



Fig. 4. (left) Project Blinkenlights, *Stereoscope*, 2008.
Image courtesy of Sam Javanrouh / Daily Dose of Imagery.

Fig. 5. (right) Jeff Koons, *Rabbit Balloon*, 2007.
Image courtesy of John Richardson at www.jrichardson.ws.

selfie-takers. Joseph Henry has pointedly suggested that Toronto's Nuit Blanche has "lately threatened to become [a] claustrophobic tourist trap, whose free nights easily degenerate into spectacles of lengthy queues, distracting volumes, and perennial photo ops" (Blouin Artinfo, "Nuit Blanche's Failed Democracy"). Nuit Blanche, he argues, has become "a kind of spectatorial checklist, as participants wend their way from one attraction to the next" (Henry, Blouin Artinfo, "Nuit Blanche's Failed Democracy"). With time, the issues raised by Nuit Blanche's social scene have expanded beyond those of crowd control and volume: it now includes concerns about personal health and safety, partly due to the belief that there is a more widespread use of drugs on event night in comparison to an average night out in the city, in addition to an increased accessibility to alcohol, as bars have received permission to extend their hours for Nuit Blanche until 4 AM (Adams, *The Globe and Mail*, "Has Toronto's Nuit Blanche Grown Too Big For Its Own Good?").

In 2010, James Bradshaw from the *Globe and Mail* spoke with Nuit Blanche visitor Erin McCutcheon, who expressed her concern that "it's become not so much about the art but more a huge party [and that] there's been so much drinking over the past two years." In 2013, Joel Eastwood of the *Toronto Star* quoted Shane Stephenson, also a spectator, who told him that "I definitely passed a few people who were openly broadcasting the fact that they were on acid. I jokingly told my friend if you tried to drug test everyone on the street, probably only one in four would pass." These incidences of increased drug use were accompanied by a rise in vandalism and violence. A couple of Nuit Blanche artworks were damaged, including Gwen MacGregor's 2013 installation of 8,000 Kinder Egg surprises, from which some of the miniature toys were stolen (Eastwood, *The Toronto Star*, "Nuit Blanche: Art Festival or Street Party?"). A man was also arrested in the same year for climbing Ai Weiwei's sculpture *Forever Bicycles* (Caracher, Blouin Artinfo). Fights have also been known to break out amongst the crowds and even beneath artworks, sometimes turning ugly.

Fig. 6. Ai Weiwei, *Forever Bicycles*, 2011.
Image courtesy of Miklos Legrady.





Those who are closely involved with putting on Nuit Blanche are not blind to the changing social dynamic of the event. When curator Christof Migone was asked, “which piece in your zone would be the most interesting?” he responded “that depends on what kind of drunk you are” (Toub, *The Globe and Mail*, “Q&A With Christof Migone”). Canadian artist and music producer Daniel Lanois—whose artwork *Later That Night at the Drive-In* featured a mash-up of classic films and their soundtracks presented over 24 large speakers and 12 projection screens—explained that, with his piece, “we are allowing ourselves a window of flexibility to improvise to the demands of our audience” adding with a chuckle that “if everybody’s high on ecstasy, we’ve got a couple of aces up the sleeve” (Bradshaw, *The Globe and Mail*, “Daniel Lanois”). In fact, the nocturnal event has become self-conscious about its increasingly unruly social scene, to the extent that one of the slogans for Toronto’s Nuit Blanche in 2016 was a reminder to “Be Nice To The Art” (nbto.com).

The Spectacular and the Site-Specific

Thus far the site-specific and the spectacular have been discussed in opposition, as if they are separated in time and offer a convenient and simplistic means of distinguishing between the early years of Toronto’s Nuit Blanche and later iterations of the event. Indeed, as of 2016, Toronto’s Nuit Blanche is just over a decade old, and one may speak of it as having a history. Its slogans, “from dusk to dawn” and “from sunset to sunrise,” likewise evoke a temporality, a time frame. George Kubler’s *The Shape of Time*, however, reminds us that time is organic. It does not simply travel forward in a single, evolutionary, unbroken line (Groom 47). Rather, time is fluid, existing in multiple interwoven states that double and bend, thicken and thin, moving forwards and backwards (Kubler 13). In this more chaotic and complex sense, time develops across a series of negotiations and links that coexist with each other (Groom 47). The history of Toronto’s Nuit Blanche itself may also be seen in similar terms. Within that history, the spectacular and the site-specific exist simultaneously, like two ends of a continuum, where each year of the event may negotiate a new position on the spectrum between them.

Some of the artworks presented at Nuit Blanche are marked by their combination of spectacular and site-specific qualities. For example, in 2015, JR’s *Eyes of the Bridge* (Fig. 7) projected black and white footage

of moving portrait photography along the side of the bridge at Bay and Front Street (“Nuit Blanche: Black and White Night”). Due to the bridge’s long and narrow space, the multiple subjects in the photographs were cropped so that only their eyes were visible. By isolating the eyes from their individual faces, the work produced an anthropomorphic sense of the eyes of the bridge. Site-specific in its adaptive tailoring to the city of Toronto’s infrastructure, as well as spectacular in its brilliant illumination and monumental size, JR’s installation presented a strikingly magnificent scene of a pair of eyes looking at the nocturnal city around it.

At first glance and from a distance, JR’s *Eyes of the Bridge* appeared to be looking outwards, as if carefully watching the people in the night-time city—an overbearing and threatening form of omnipresent surveillance. Upon closer examination, however, JR’s choice to focus exclusively on the eyes opens up this artwork to another interpretation: looking inwards, so to follow the clichéd phrase that the “eyes are the windows to the soul.” The installation therefore provided an evocative opportunity for spectators to reflect inwards upon their own identities and presence within the city, and to find similarities with the identities represented in the video. The individuals that appeared in the installation were of visibly different genders and ethnicities, but what could also be gleaned from reading the accompanying curatorial text was that all of them were witnesses to extreme violence and poverty in their own city streets.

Fig. 7. JR, *Eyes of the Bridge*, 2015.
Image courtesy of Ashley Duffus / A Great Capture.

JR made a conscious effort to choose and film “the eyes of individuals who dream to be in Toronto”; they are the ordinary people living in war-torn countries, such as Syria, who hoped to find refuge in Canadian cities (“Nuit Blanche: Black and White Night”). If they were to make it to Toronto, they might even cross the very same bridge on which the work was installed, as this bridge is one of the major passages into Toronto via Union Station.

JR’s footage showed the diversity in ways of looking, which can be wistful, sad, curious, and even inquisitive. Their eyes express emotion, where some squint or crinkle from smiling while others show signs of tears. It can therefore be said that JR’s *Eyes of the Bridge* presents a self-reflexive representation of sight itself (Thompson 33). We are looking at something that, in a way, looks back, evoking Hall Foster’s notion of ‘visuality’ and vision: the way we look, what we look at, and how we even go about looking (Foster ix). Within this framework, this artwork presents a choice as to how it could be seen. This filmic installation is not only a spectacle of projected light, but also a poignant and reflective piece of site-specific intervention.

The spectacular and the site-specific exist simultaneously at Nuit Blanche, within individual artworks, as well as across the event’s visual and social scenes. But in terms of the overall event, Toronto’s Nuit Blanche, has not maintained a good balance between them, and the situation has gotten out of hand. The event is caught in a cycle that continually perpetuates and valorises the visually and socially spectacular.

Spectacular and monumental artworks created by globally-recognized artists prove to be incredibly popular with the general public and the media. These high-profile artworks continue to draw enormous local, national, and international audiences every year. This exposure, in turn, generates greater economic opportunities for the city—especially for its tourism and food service industries. As such, the organizing committee for Toronto’s Nuit Blanche has repeatedly favoured spectacular artworks by international artists over the more locally site-specific—a fact made all the more evident by the preferential financial treatment that they receive in the event’s budgeting scheme.

Three years after the first Nuit Blanche in Toronto, artworks became categorized into two main groups, as either partnered or curated projects (MacGregor 26). Partnered projects include artworks that are created and funded in association with major arts institutions, such as the Art Gallery of Ontario, but also include independent projects that are created and self-funded by local artists and arts collectives (“Nuit Blanche: Art Projects”). These independently partnered projects are mostly site-specific, popping up in communities and neighbourhoods, such the West Queen West Area, that support local arts practices by helping to provide materials or exhibition spaces. The other half of Nuit Blanche artworks consist of curated projects, which predominately consist of work by nationally and internationally recognized artists, and are divided into a three-tiered hierarchy. There are artworks selected from an open-call, based on how well they coincide with the zone’s curatorial theme, receiving

a maximum budget of \$10,000 (“Nuit Blanche: Open Call Application Guidelines”). Then there are a couple artworks per zone highlighted as “monumental,” and are specially commissioned by the curator and the city at a cost of \$30,000 each (MacGregor 26). Finally, one or two extremely monumental and spectacular projects are chosen by curators to anchor Toronto’s Nuit Blanche, with minimum budgets of at least \$100,000. These works are almost always located at City Hall’s Nathan Philips Square (MacGregor 26).

By observing where Toronto’s Nuit Blanche invests the bulk of its resources, we see a clear prioritization of the international and the spectacular. So while bigger and brighter artworks are undoubtedly well backed and budgeted, the financial support for those who are already internationally recognized produces a situation where those artists are able to do more, and to create more spectacularly polished artworks in return. In other words, Toronto’s Nuit Blanche is guilty of perpetuating a feedback loop where the internationally spectacular generate even more spectacular art. In contrast, local artists from Toronto are restricted in what they can realistically create, regardless of whether it is a spectacular display or site-specific intervention, due to a lack of sufficient financial resources and general support of the city. In 2008, for instance, nationally recognized Toronto-based painter and installation artist Katharine Harvey was collaborating with curator Gordon Hatt on a large-scale installation for City Hall that was both spectacular and site-specific. She was eventually bumped from her location, and her budget was also downgraded, to accommodate *Stereoscope* by

the German arts collective Project Blinkenlights as the monumental and spectacular highlight for that year (MacGregor 26). So despite the continued exhibition of works by local artists from the city, or even by artists who are recognized across Canada, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to break into the spotlight. Toronto's Nuit Blanche therefore becomes a battleground in which artworks literally need to out-shine each other in competition for the top spot.

The coexistence of both spectacular and site-specific artworks at Toronto's Nuit Blanche, with a clear prioritization for the spectacle, puts stress on the relationship between them. The politics of the event have therefore become increasingly tense as artists and curators are subject to the demand for spectacle. The corresponding focus on the event's spectacularity and popularity, and the perception that little attention is being paid to individual artworks themselves (whether these be site-specific or not), is now causing the event to quickly lose favour amongst members of Toronto's contemporary arts community (MacGregor 3). In fact, Joseph Henry accurately summarizes this situation in describing the overall event as an "uneasy encounter between the contemporary art world and its public sphere" (Blouin Artinfo, "Nuit Blanche's Failed Democracy"). The result is a scene that no longer coheres, and is unbalanced between the spectacular and the site-specific. This disjuncture is echoed within the sociability of the event, since the degree to which spectators are actively, critically, and meaningfully engaged with the art at Toronto's Nuit Blanche is unclear amidst the broader spectacle of it all.

Spectatorship

Let us return, briefly, to Nicolas Bourriaud's characterization of art as a "site that produces a specific sociability" (161). By reading nuance into this statement, it might be more appropriate to say that art is suggestive of a specific sociability, instead of insinuating that art directly produces a specific social scene, or that it is conducive towards the emergence of one. This open ambiguity inherent in the perception of art marks the very condition of spectatorship. As a result, an artwork's social repercussions are varied, vast, and impossible to define—which holds true for spectacular and site-specific artworks exhibited at Toronto's Nuit Blanche, in that the social politics of spectatorship are ambiguous for all forms of art. Site-specific art does not always produce active engagement, and spectacular art does not necessarily generate passive contemplation.

Site-specific artworks that hope to inspire dialogue and critical engagement between the public and local spaces are perhaps too optimistic in their project of social intervention. There is no way to measure whether site-specific art generates a positive effect in areas such as community engagement, or if it even produces a greater interest in the arts overall. In fact, the surge of participants to Toronto's Nuit Blanche has not translated into a noticeable increase of visitors to art galleries, museums, and institutions across the city (curator Sara R. Sheridan and city staffer Marilyn Nicol quoted in MacGregor 39). This is not to say that members of Nuit Blanche's audiences are not interested

in the arts, or that they are not conscious of the ideas and issues raised by an artwork's relationship to a specific site. However, there is a difference between grasping the issues which an artwork brings to light, and actually choosing to follow up on a particular issue and to do something about it. As Rancière argues, the impact of art on behaviour has little to do with whether or not the public readily understands the issues raised by a work, and more to do with the extent to which members of that public have confidence in their own abilities to act on those issues (Rancière 83). This situation is particularly well illustrated by Belmore's *Gone Indian*. Although Belmore raises issues about violence against Indigenous women, these issues are deeply entrenched within the fabric of our culture and society and are therefore difficult to tackle. Changing social perceptions and raising awareness about the violence facing Indigenous women is a good first step, but it is difficult for the average participant at Nuit Blanche to go forward and act in a way that makes a noticeable difference. It is in relation to works such as this that Nuit Blanche is criticized for its lack of active participation, but also for having almost no lasting effect on the city or on the ways in which people circulate within it.

On the other hand, it would be irresponsible to characterize the social scene at Toronto's Nuit Blanche as one full of passive participants who are swept up by the urban spectacle. This not only generalizes the behaviour of more than 1.2 million participating spectators, but also perpetuates the myth that spectatorship is inherently passive. In the

Emancipated Spectator, Jacques Rancière troubles the binary opposition between those who create art (be it painting, sculpture, installation, or performance) and those who consume it. For Rancière, this duality presents an “allegory of inequality” because, like all other oppositions, it assigns value (12). Here, creation on the part of the artist is “good” because it is active and productive, whereas consumption on the part of the spectator is “bad” because it is passive and it is perceived to do nothing (Rancière 12). In questioning the limited account of spectatorship presumed by this binary, Rancière argues that the challenge is not that of transforming the terms of spectatorship so that it becomes active and productive (Rancière 17). Rather, it is the realization that watching, looking, listening, interpreting, and the other dimensions of being a spectator are already productive actions in their own right (Rancière 13); these are actions that constitute our existing and normal state as constant spectators in this world.

Spectators play a major part in shaping the character of Nuit Blanche because it is staged within public space and is inherently rooted in how the public, as active agents, participates and interacts with it. For some, the event is all about the art: a chance to see spectacular installations by internationally renowned artists, or a good occasion to check out a trendy local gallery or a grassroots arts initiative in the community. For others it presents the opportunity to hang out and enjoy a fun party. At Toronto's Nuit Blanche it is almost impossible to see and do everything in just one night. The meaning of Nuit Blanche therefore depends on decisions made

by spectators, in terms of how they choose to treat the event and the opinions that they form about it (Borsato and Harper, Canadian Art “10 Artists' Nuit Blanche Tips and Troubles”). For instance, Kim Solga took her class from the University of Western Ontario on a field trip to Toronto's Nuit Blanche in 2013 as an experiment in participatory spectatorship. The group concluded that, although “Nuit Blanche is now marketed and represented in the media as a good-time street party [...] it does not necessarily follow that the meanings Nuit Blanche makes for spectators on the ground are in any way stable, or necessarily banal” because the spectators themselves are a fluid group of individuals (Austin et al. 108). In the production of endlessly diverse experiences, artworks that are perceived as spectacular or site-specific for some spectators may be seen differently by others and vice versa. For some, even the top-billed spectacular artworks may be disappointments that do not live up to their online descriptions and media hype (Austin et al. 109). Instead, it could be the small things, the unexpected moments, and the artworks that are slowly and quietly engaging which could constitute the most memorable and interesting parts of the night.

In the span of ten years, Toronto's Nuit Blanche has exhibited artworks that intimately engage with the city's site-specific histories and physical localities, and it has also exhibited monumental artworks of an international calibre that aestheticize night-time illumination and capitalize on the popularity for the spectacular. In looking to the future of the event, I expect that Toronto's Nuit Blanche will continue to struggle with and between the spectacular and the site-specific, existing in a state of tension between the two. However, it is this tension that makes for a uniquely dynamic situation, in that the nocturnal event is not only an outdoor exhibition, but also an “artistic and curatorial laboratory” in which to observe the changing visual and social scenes in relation to each other (Adams, *The Globe and Mail*, “Has Toronto's Nuit Blanche Grown Too Big For Its Own Good?”). In its relatively brief history, Toronto's Nuit Blanche has demonstrated experimentation and an extraordinarily flexible format through the changes made to its zones, curators, and the types of art that it exhibits (Sandals, “10 Thoughts”). Despite being just over a decade old, the festival continues to transform itself. In this process of change, however, Toronto's Nuit Blanche has consistently shown a tendency to look to the public. This way of responding to the audience has brought controversy and its own set of issues, but, at

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the very least, has demonstrated its organizers' desire to take its participating spectators into consideration. Members of its audience wield considerable power towards Toronto's Nuit Blanche, in the ways in which they conduct themselves during the night, but also in how they talk, write, or post about the event in the days, weeks, and months which follow. Individually, spectators are able to set their own curatorial programs in choosing the artworks they want to see. As a group, spectators also have the ability to reflect the overall trending interests, and have therefore come to hold an increasingly influential position in determining the types of artworks for future Nuit Blanches. In speaking as a participating spectator myself, I attend Toronto's Nuit Blanche not for the spectacular party, nor for the extremely critical site-specific interventions, but for the ephemeral opportunity to see and experience the city alive, awake, and made strange by the fascinating variety of artworks and individuals in the late hours of the night. I imagine that despite the shifting relationship between spectacular and site-specific, across both the visual and social scenes at Nuit Blanche, the true heart of the event lies in us spectators as we negotiate a customized balance of interests between different art forms, and generate our own meaningful experiences of the city of Toronto at night.

Figure Appendix

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| Figure 1a | Rebecca Belmore, <i>Gone Indian</i> , 2009. Performed at Toronto's Nuit Blanche in 2009.

Image courtesy of Paul Litherland. | Figure 4 | Project Blinkenlights. <i>Stereoscope</i> , 2008. Shown in situ at City Hall as a part of Toronto's Nuit Blanche in 2008.

Image courtesy of Sam Javanrouh / Daily Dose of Imagery. |
| Figure 1b | Rebecca Belmore, <i>Gone Indian</i> , 2009. Detail of Belmore deforming pennies.

Image courtesy of Paul Litherland. | Figure 5 | Jeff Koons, <i>Rabbit Balloon</i> , 2007. Shown at the Eaton Centre as a part of Toronto's Nuit Blanche in 2009.

Image courtesy of John Richardson at www.jrichardson.ws . |
| Figure 2 | Yvette Mattern, 2009, <i>Global Rainbow</i> , 2014. Shown in situ at the CN Tower as a part of Toronto's Nuit Blanche in 2014.

Image courtesy of Zach Sloodsky. | Figure 6 | Ai Weiwei, <i>Forever Bicycles</i> , 2011. Shown in situ at City Hall as a part of Toronto's Nuit Blanche in 2013.

Image courtesy of Miklos Legrady. |
| Figure 3 | Director X, <i>Death of The Sun</i> , 2016. Shown in situ at City Hall as a part of Toronto's Nuit Blanche in 2016.

Image courtesy of Ben Roffelsen. | Figure 7 | JR, <i>Eyes of the Bridge</i> , 2015. Shown in situ at Bay and Front Street as part of Toronto's Nuit Blanche in 2015.

Image courtesy of Ashley Duffus / A Great Capture. Video courtesy of Kathryn Yuen. |

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