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Murray Whyte

As I write this, it's 1:30 in the afternoon Sunday. I've been awake for exactly 45 minutes, after having pulled the obligatory all-nighter in the annual hunt for something worth staying up for at [Nuit Blanche](#).

So, cranky? A little. But as anyone who's done the run-through in previous years knows, the event is always a significant hit-or-miss proposition. People like me throw best guesses out there in the days leading up, but none of us have any idea how any one of the 130 projects will play out in the cool dark of night. A breathless, city-led promotional machine assures you that you'll see your city like you've never seen it before — which is true, in ways not all good — transformed, as it's meant to be, by artists.

The truth is, that transformation is more a traffic than cultural phenomenon, as a steady million people have crowded Nuit Blanche's central axis of Yonge and Queen Sts. for a steady three years running, and that in itself is a minor triumph.

The event itself, meanwhile, can make no such claim. Nobody goes to an opening to see the art, and while social energy is an essential part of art viewing, it can't be the only thing to be successful. Nuit Blanche's biggest problem is that it's simultaneously an opening and a closing; it has the unnerving sense of being lost in a sometimes turbulent sea, scrambling for dry land wherever you can find it. Last night, more often than not, it was inhospitable, either by virtue of impenetrable crowd or trifling experience.

The event's nominal centrepiece, "Later That Night at the Drive-In," a sprawling sound and video installation by Daniel Lanois, was the former, but I couldn't tell you about the latter: Navigating the throngs around 1 a.m., it was far too crowded to even attempt to get near.

And this after guiding my bicycle through the unruly, vaguely threatening section of Queen St. W. near Gladstone Ave., where, just before midnight, I caught my first whiff of vomit in the men's room at the Gladstone Hotel. Given the venue's special status as a Nuit Blanche hub, granted an extended last call, this was not a good thing. Outside, unlocking my bike, a telltale sign of the true art lovers' priorities here: "F--- it, man, the bars are open until 4 — let's get some beers!" Ah, culture.

It's no secret, of course, that Nuit Blanche provides a vast range of experience, depending on your priorities. Earlier in the evening, at my very own Nuit Blanche project called "Speed Art Criticism," some colleagues and I were visited by a good bunch of aspiring artists with work to show us (Violet, age 4, was my favourite; gifted, to be sure) and the feelgood, family vibe was enough to give me a little bit of hope that the event, for all its corporate promotion and occasional nastiness, could, in small spates, accomplish what art ought to: Provide tiny moments of meaningful personal exchange.

It was also an abject lesson in the highs and lows of the exercise, and this year was notably low. If I had to choose one word, it would be underwhelming, from the major projects all the way down to the usually quietly magical community hubs. Trinity Bellwoods Park, reliable for this in years past, was notably mailed in: An adult-size jungle gym (a few blocks from those 4 a.m. last calls, my first thought wasn't for the artistic intent, but the breadth of the city's insurance policy for drunken monkey-bar enthusiasts); a fire juggler; and a campfire ringed by a dense haze of pot smoke.

Things started to look up by the time we pedaled into the financial district — another problem, possibly unsolvable, is getting around; like previous years, streetcars were dangerously full and with large portions of Queen, Yonge and Bloor closed off, driving was just plain stupid



Nuit Blanche fans became part of the spectacle during the 2010 edition of the all-night arts fest on Oct. 3.

STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

— where a small cluster of projects around the Cloud Garden off Temperance St. nabbed my attention, if momentarily. “Big O,” in which the wind from opposing banks of fans held aloft a ring of magnetic tape, had a sparse hilarity to it as the tape fluttered and spun in the lobby of the Bay Adelaide Centre.

Across the road in the Cloud Garden, Annie Onyi Chung’s “_scape with 6 and 7,” with its penetrating soundtrack of deep breathing, coupled with a luminous video of a shifting abstract landscape, was my night’s first feeling of being somewhere other than an overcrowded street fair — which, you’d think, is the point. Across the street at Scotia Plaza, Michael Fernandes’s “Arrivals/Departure,” where audience members took chalk and answered a series of sometimes personal questions, underscored my main worry for the event: Good on paper, not so much in person.

Over in Brookfield Place, my first contender for best of: Micah Lexier and Martin Arnold’s music-made-tangible exploration of Erik Satie’s *Vexations*; Satie intended the piano piece to be played 840 times in succession, which Lexier and Arnold saw to; they also had 840 pieces of sheet music folded identically into simple sculpture to mirror, materially, Satie’s discipline of perfect, sequential repetition. If it sounds dry, it’s not: the quiet tinkling keys, a growing plateau of blue paper sculpture, all under the equally disciplined steel wing by Santiago Calatrava made for the night’s first unmitigated moment of magic.

Out on Yonge St., meanwhile, magic was a little harder to find. Part of it was the crowds, part of it was the cluster of product promotional tents handing out freebies like energy drinks (I wondered if this was an “all-night contemporary art thing” or the CNE, and then quickly realized in the tourist-industry point of view, it’s the same thing) and part of it, undeniably, was the “art.” Max Streicher’s inflatable clown heads wedged between buildings — on paper, a one-liner at best — ended up even less so as a cheap and nasty spectacle. Sandra Rechico’s heady light installation, a penetrating blue beam marking the original pre-industrial shores of Lake Ontario, ended up being deflected into a luminous backdrop by a too-close crowd.

Turning up mercifully peaceful Victoria St., Chris Shepherd’s *The Task* stopped me, along with a modest crowd, in our tracks as he stoically moved 15 tons of cinder blocks from one place to the next and back again. Quietly resolute, he was notably out of place in the spectacle-desperate night, and I mean that as high complement.

Also refreshingly incongruous was my personal highlight, Mammalian Diving Reflex’s “Nuit Market,” in Victoria Lane; kitty corner the aggressively branded, corporate advertising-fest in Yonge-Dundas Square, the market, with its modest mom-and-pop food stalls, live musicians and knock-off designer underwear, functioned as conceptual counterpoint and homey, comfy marketplace. Its scale — i.e., human — reminded me we live so massively out of context with real experience, that it’s easy to forget, and I’m grateful to Mammalian for the reminder.

Anyway, on to Yorkville, where I learned at 3 a.m. that Kent Monkman’s performance, “Iskootao,” shut down at 11 to appease the luxury condo owners nearby (curiously, Queen West merits no such consideration, as I learned heading west into a chaotically drunken throng a few hours later). Not much left to do here but pass by the ROM, where a notably half-hearted projection by The OpenEnded Group lazily threw videos of walking figures on the Crystal’s aluminum siding. The program, of course, promised more, but with the Crystal, it’s in good company.

Just before 4, and time for a final look-see at U of T, where Marina Abramovich’s “Imponderabilia” stood in a doorway at Hart House. This was more like it: Two naked people standing a little too close for me to pass between them, which was the point, and I did, to my flushed-face embarrassment. In one of the reading rooms, a real wood fire crackled; in the courtyard, Dean Baldwin had installed an ice-fishing shed/barbecue shack/bar. Quirky, quiet, intimate, slightly strange: This was my favourite moment. At 5 a.m., I called it a Nuit.

Nuit Blanche 2010: Five things

- 1. Nuit Market:** A clever, honest — and delicious — counterpoint to Nuit Blanche’s spectacle of cheap artifice. A homespun refuge where I could have spent hours. Next year: chairs, please.
- 2. Erik Satie’s Vexations:** A quirkily contemplative oasis amid the chaos, and a perfect match to the crisp precision of downtown’s best bit of architecture at Brookfield Place.
- 3. Big ‘O’:** Sometimes simple is best. Maybe not for Nuit Blanche, conventional wisdom suggests, which often seems like a shouting match between the biggest, brightest and loudest, but the modest crowd assembled to watch a ring of tape dance seemed to hold some general wisdom for future instalments.
- 4. The Task:** It’s the old conceptual brain in me that loves process art, but Chris Shepherd’s piece was also perfectly timed: Amid so much meaningless spectacle, an essay on simplicity, human-scale gesture and endurance was a perfect antidote.

5. Hart House: Intimate, contemplative, homey and, with its ice-fishing shack perched on a bed of real ice, counter-intuitively, quirkily hilarious, the Barnicke Gallery was the only institution intent on creating an experience, not a spectacle. As ever, it looked good on them.

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