

Taking the Measure of Nuit Blanche 2014

Students from Western University's Inaugural Theatre Studies Cohort Reflect on Their Journey to Toronto's All-Night Art Extravaganza

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HOLOSCENES, by Lars Jan.

Photo courtesy of Scotiabank Nuit Blanche City of Toronto



AMAZE turned out to be largely a vehicle for selfies.
 Photo courtesy of Scotiabank Nuit Blanche City of Toronto

Introduction

Six years ago Laura Levin and I reflected in this space on our travels through the 2008 edition of Toronto's Scotiabank Nuit Blanche all-night art festival. Our review offered a trenchant critique of the ways in which "the event that is Nuit Blanche" was beginning uncomfortably to "eclip[s] the art that is Nuit Blanche" (Levin and Solga). Today, with almost a decade of Nuit Blanches behind us, with attendance numbers increasing every year, and with Toronto an established "creative city" at the forefront of urban neoliberalism, that critique seems almost too obvious. Nuit Blanche is now marketed and represented in the media as a good-time street party, but it does not necessarily follow that the meanings Nuit Blanche makes for spectators on the ground are in any way stable, or necessarily banal.

In October 2014 I set out for Nuit Blanche with a vanload of students from my undergraduate performance studies seminar. Our goal: to experience as much of the festival as possible, with an eye to investigating the ways in which the art on offer hailed its spectators and invited our active, participatory engagement. What did Nuit Blanche want from a keen and largely novice group of performance art enthusiasts? What would it offer us in return? Would it let us down? And, if so, what might we learn from our disappointment?

We prepared for our field trip by poring over the Nuit Blanche website, then advocating in class for pieces that sounded as though they would be evocative, moving, worth both our time and our critical labour. When we returned to Western, we reviewed our visit using a cluster of writing exercises built around three prompts: "I was moved by ...," "I was underwhelmed by ...," and "That's me in the frame." Several students did follow-up research on particular pieces we witnessed in order better to contextualize our group's reactions to them. As we wrote and talked together, we progressed from dwelling on our feelings of elation and frustration to thinking critically about how those feelings motivated a politics of street-level spectatorship in the contemporary creative city.

What follows is a snapshot of our conversations.

HOLOSCENES, created by Lars Jan, Roundhouse Park

Caitlin Austin and Minji (Rita) Kim: While doing our online research on the Nuit Blanche website many of us shortlisted *HOLOSCENES*, and we were, as a group, mesmerized by this performance. It featured an enormous, aquarium-like tank that was constantly filled with or drained of water while within it performers attempted to accomplish such everyday tasks as gathering fruit



Kiran Friesen as Kiran in *2YouTopia*, by Vertical City.
Photo courtesy of Scotiabank Nuit Blanche City of Toronto

into a basket or cleaning windows with a squeegee. Light shone through the tank like sunlight through the ocean; the performers' flowing garments danced and fell through the rising and falling water. The performance seemed ethereal; it captivated, but it also managed to pose challenging questions: *how* should we watch and understand its central actions?

Jonas Trotter and Kat Dos Santos: The performers inside the tank acted out simple forms of labour that, in our culture, have negative stigma attached to them: fruit-gathering and window-cleaning are the jobs we associate with the poor and uneducated. As the tank filled with water, however, these tasks took on an otherworldly quality. With the addition of the light and water, the very mundane, even abject, actions that made up this performance were transformed into the dances of angels.

Caitlin and Rita: Though the weather was chilly, no one among us dared to walk away from *HOLOSCENES*. In our discussions later, we found that we shared a feeling that, for some reason, we owed the performers our time, the respect of good spectatorship. Despite the freezing weather and our tired feet, we stood there for close to an hour. We acknowledged that the perpetual action of filling and draining water and the cyclical nature of the performance left us craving a finale. We had hoped for some kind of dramaturgical closure that would give us "permission" to walk away.

Jonas and Kat: Reflecting on what we had seen, some among us expressed concern as to whether *HOLOSCENES* was problematic in the way it glamorized the work of day labourers. While this performance did "lift" such work up to our view, inviting us to appreciate an underlying beauty in it, it also put forward an image of manual labour that reinforced preconceived ideas and stereotypes. When the water drained from the tank and the performers were left soaked and shivering, *HOLOSCENES* offered us a firm reminder of why this type of labour remains stigmatized.

AMAZE, Marcos Zotes, Queen Street West

Sarah Gilpin: Many of the exhibits offered as part of Nuit Blanche 2014 did not live up to their online billing. The life-sized maze installation, *AMAZE*, promised a truly interactive experience. The description of the installation spoke of "a fully immersive environment of light and sound in the heart of the city" in which each spectator would experience "a personal journey of discovery, transformation and challenge" (*Amaze, 2014*). This was anything but the experience I had as I walked through the installation. Though it had lured us excitedly into its long, snaking line, once inside, I found *AMAZE* to be little more than a photo opportunity for spectators to dutifully take selfies. I imagined that when each spec-

tator posted their selfie on social media, those seeing the picture might be prompted to attend *Nuit Blanche* the following year—in much the same way I was lured in by clever marketing. In this way, spectators' experiences were turned effortlessly into free advertising for Scotiabank *Nuit Blanches* to come. But what do these selfies actually convey to viewers about the reality of this festival?

2YouTopia, devised by Vertical City, City Hall Parkade

Caitlin and Rita: Part of choosing how to take part in a participatory performance lies in determining one's physical relation to the performance space. *2YouTopia* featured an industrial-scale installation of rods and poles that was home to Kiran, the sole inhabitant. In the piece, Kiran (performer Kiran Friesen) lives an isolated, dystopian life: climbing, sleeping, reading. The installation did not designate a specific viewing area: some members of the audience ventured as close to the set as possible, looking for a connection with Kiran, maybe eye contact. Some stayed farther back or walked around the set space, perhaps watching the piece primarily as an acrobatic spectacle [Friesen is an actor, writer, and pole dancer]. It can be uncomfortable to place yourself at the front of a crowd, for you then run the risk of becoming visible, observed. However, the freedom to position ourselves as we felt comfortable at *2YouTopia* also required us to decide how active we wished our spectatorship to be: how much of ourselves we wanted to offer to the performer and when we wanted to withdraw. The weight of these choices stayed with us.

Jonas and Kat: *2YouTopia*, like *HOLOSCENES*, foregrounded the intimate relationship between labour and performance. Both showcased performance work as intensive, exhausting, and an ongoing process, but *2YouTopia* did so by drawing careful attention to the quiet, emotional exertion of its solo performer—and her relationship to us.

As the performance drew us into the parking garage, it pulled spectators momentarily away from the crowds and the frenetic activity of *Nuit Blanche* at street level. This simple removal of our bodies from the crowds heightened our ability to identify with Kiran in her own segregation from society. Because the performance was durational as well as distanced physically from the evening's bustle, it also offered spectators the opportunity to leave and re-enter the performance. We found that this freedom ultimately enabled us to experience Kiran's emotional shifts in a particularly striking way. After witnessing the beginning of the story early in the evening, with Kiran joyfully talking to her only companion, the computer AI, we returned 4 hours later as the story was nearing its end (it operated on a 2-hour "loop"). With the exhaustion of an evening spent at *Nuit Blanche* now heavy in our bones, we witnessed Kiran fall into a striking sense of solitude as AI's voice died away for the last time. The contrast between her initial contentment and the now-desolate sadness that permeated the parking garage opened up, for us, the potential to empathize with the performer Kiran as well as the character Kiran, and also to come to terms with our own increasing fatigue as spectators on an all-night art journey.

Conclusion: Marketing, art, and audience resistance

Sarah: Despite our experiences at *2YouTopia* and *HOLOSCENES*, it was obvious to us by the end of the night that *Nuit Blanche* is a consumer-driven event. I paid special attention to how some companies were using the festival as a cynical opportunity to draw crowds into their stores. Lululemon is a good example: outside its Queen Street shop we saw a performance of a woman meditating, apparently for the duration of the night, in a large bubble. The female "actor" was required to remain perfectly still inside her bubble, mirroring a mannequin, while Lululemon's storefront offered a ready-made frame (Goffman) for the business to lure in customers who obviously intended art, not yoga gear, to be their primary focus of attention.

I did some research and discovered that Lululemon's "bubble" was not a registered *Nuit Blanche* event; the company clearly chose to use the appeal of the festival to pretend it was offering its customers more than just retail goods for sale. For me, the storefront performance created unease, as it undermined the sincerity of *Nuit Blanche*'s larger frame. Were we being marketed to at every performance? we began to wonder. Walking past the shop later in the evening, our group discovered that Lululemon didn't really intend their performance to be credible: though it pretended to be a 12-hour meditation by *one individual*, by the end of the night there was plainly a different performer in the bubble bearing the Lululemon logo.

Caitlin and Rita: After reflecting on both the good and the bad of our experiences at *Nuit Blanche*, we realized that, on the whole, the pieces that depended less on spectators' scripted "buy-in" paradoxically allowed us to interact with them on a more meaningful level, provoking critical engagement that the more obvious participatory events actually shut down. Performances that invited us to do something specific, such as the flashy *AMAZE*, were less memorable than those more open and ambivalent in their invitation. What stayed with us were the pieces that challenged our ideas about what it means to be an "active" participant at an event like Scotiabank *Nuit Blanche* and in a "creative city" like Toronto.

Works Cited

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About the Authors

In fall 2014, Caitlin Austin, Kat Dos Santos, Sarah Gilpin, Minji (Rita) Kim, and Jonas Trottier took part in "Performance Beyond Theatres," the second-year performance studies course in Western University's new theatre studies major and minor program. Kim Solga, a founding faculty member in theatre studies at Western, led the class. She also drove the *Nuit Blanche* minivan.