

A Sleepless Night of Art

By [Janis Cole](#) • Published February 1st, 2007 • [Issue 65, Spring 2007](#) • [0 Comments](#)



Pharmacopia. Photo by Noelle Elia.

Nuit Blanche references a natural phenomena-taking place where dusk meets dawn, creating a night without darkness. It's a sleepless night. A White Night. The concept was born in Paris and this year Toronto joined half a dozen cities worldwide in hosting its own *Nuit Blanche* which lasted twelve hours ending at dawn on October 1st.

I would remain out all night, which seemed integral to the concept, see exhibits throughout all three downtown Toronto zones and record the night not as a documentarist with a camera, but as a documenter with a pen.

7:35—I ventured into the streets in full rain gear, wondering what to expect, and hoping the weather would not derail attendance. Upon spotting pockets of similarly attired folk hovering in front of venues along Bloor Street, I began to feel the magic of *Nuit Blanche*.

7:45—Trinity Church near Spadina and the Bata Shoe Museum had umbrella clusters thirty strong from people waiting in line. I made a

mental note to check these exhibits later and headed towards the ROM (Royal Ontario Museum).

8:25—A theme inherent to the planning of *Nuit Blanche* struck me as I left the ROM and began my planned agenda on Yorkville Avenue. I'd barely been out an hour when I felt the ease of fluctuating between exhibits I found by circumstance and ones I planned to see. This created a spontaneity that gave the event an art festival atmosphere. As the night progressed, I also came to realize that the matching of art and space was integral to *Nuit Blanche*, resulting not only in viewers experiencing art differently, but also in having them consider public spaces artistically.

8:35—The crowd was dense for General Idea's installation of *Pharma@opia*, three oversize pills/blimps floating in the night sky and referencing the AIDS pandemic. One pill was totally yellow, another red, and the third was half-and-half. They were suspended in air, and anchored with string. The austere construction offered viewers a place to contemplate wellness and disease, human loss and human rights.

Gazing at the pills I remembered my brother Barry, and friends Tim Jocelyn, Errol Ramsey, Thomas Gardnier, Ray Richards, Michael Balser... until a woman interrupted the graveyard in my mind to were strangers, but struck up an immediately-familiar-with-each-other conversation, (which turned out to be typical when meeting strangers over the night). She had just come from the Cumberland movie theatre and knew nothing about *Nuit Blanche*. She shared her thoughts on Jennifer Baichwal's documentary *Manufactured Landscapes*, and I filled her in on the exhibition of "manufactured" wellness, in the "landscape" of lost artists.

9:00—The sound of Grace Slick singing "One pill makes you larger, and one pill makes you small..." pulled my thoughts out of the AIDS epidemic, and propelled me back to a time of free love.

9:05—I faced a large-scale installation comprised of psychedelic swirls of 1960's imagery and nostalgic tunes of the same era. *I Am Curious – Yorkville*, by Annette Mangaard and Ihor Holubizky was an arresting DVD loop of Yorkville hippies, cafes, the roots of folk music and a historic street protest. A live camera feed captured people in the crowd and mixed them into the archival clips on screen. It was technically clever and thoroughly enjoyable. It was also a political statement saturated with irony. I found out from the artists, who mingled with the crowd, why I hadn't been able to bring my scooter down Yorkville Avenue. Toronto police were blocking traffic for this very installation, which, by coincidence included footage of a 1967 protest with hundreds of hippies trying (not successfully) to get traffic blocked from Yorkville at that time to make it a pedestrian mall.

Also ironic, the footage included shots of the quaint Yorkville café that had inhabited the same corner back in the 1960s where the 12' X 16' screen was now mounted and filled with riot footage. A canopy framed the top of the screen advertising a new development on the corner, the nine-storey Hazelton Hotel and Residences, with 77 hotel rooms and 16 private condominiums, set to open in June of 2007. The combination of art and public location for this piece proved to be the most provocative I experienced throughout the night.

10:30—A lively crowd of several hundred mingled on McCaul Street as I parked my bike at the Ontario College of Art & Design (OCAD). The Sharp Centre of Design has been heralded as Toronto's boldest architectural statement of the century. For *Nuit Blanche*, the purple glow of the building, perched on multi-coloured stilts, lit a path from Butterfield Park to *A Glow in the Dark*, an exhibition of film, painting, sculpture, interactive media, performance, installations and photography inside OCAD.

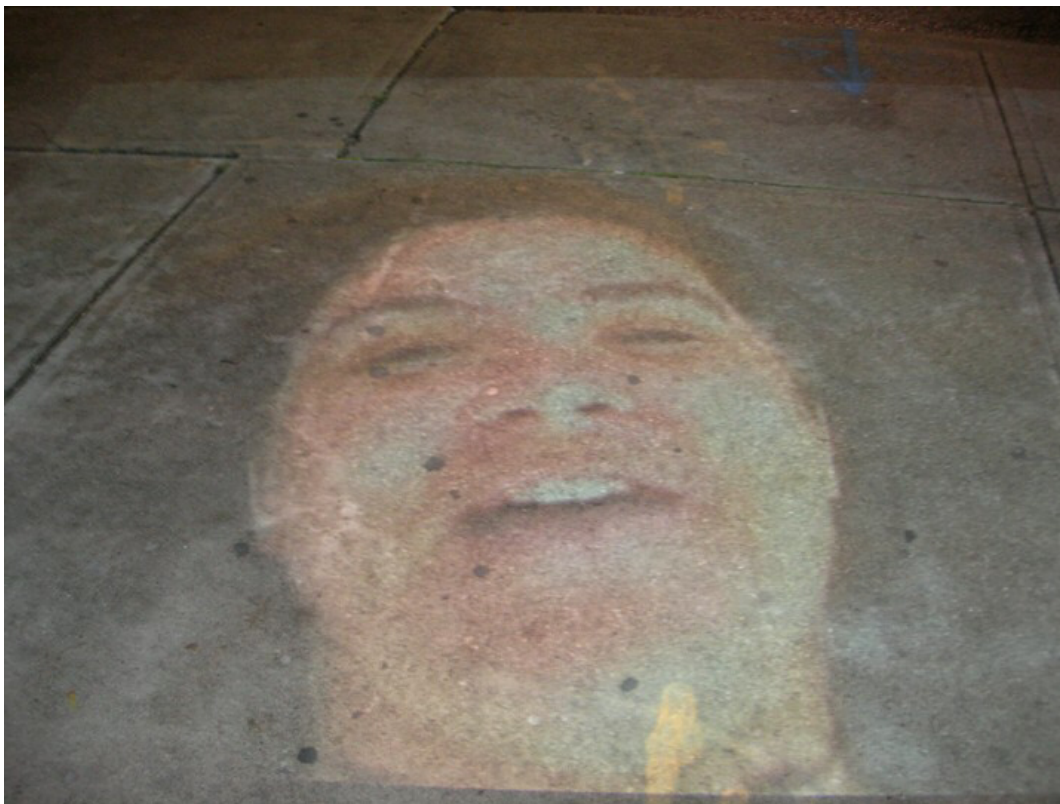
11:25—There was a good crowd for a selection of Michael Snow films.

His experimental cinema is legendary and generates mixed emotions—intrigue, frustration, curiosity, exhilaration and awe. Local artist Petra Chevrier handled the 16 mm film projection, and told me it was truly exciting to see younger people understanding the scope and ambition of Snow's work, especially his classic *Wavelength*.

12:05—David Rokeby's side-by-side floor-mounted projections of Butterfield Park six floors below the Sharp Centre of Design brought the outside in. His cleverly mounted cameras made you feel as if you were spying on the action right through the floor. In keeping with his distinct style, Rokeby's piece focused on real-time events, and directly engaged the viewer with artificial systems of perception. He told me that the art exhibit of people playing on oversized boardgames in Butterfield Park below was a happy accident that perfectly matched his concept. He wanted his piece to be friendly, so that viewers could jump right into experiencing it—and they did.

2:00—Trinity Bellwoods Park offered a wide selection of exhibits. I visited *Night Swim*, a public pool converted to a spa and disco water lounge, filled with people having a great time.

2:45—Queen's Car Wash on Queen West offered a clever reinvention of space, turning each of the four bays into screening rooms for a selection of independent videos.



Michael Alstad projection. Photo by Janis Cole.

3:20—There was a wide selection of options available at 401 Richmond where I watched short films on the rooftop. Crowds were still lining up to see most exhibitions, and many of the young people I encountered here, and all during the night, seemed not of the art world. Nonetheless, they were delighted to be experiencing the art. This lack of inhibition seemed key to people from all walks of life enjoying *Nuit Blanche*.

4:25—John Greyson and David Wall had transformed the Harrison Baths and Swimming Pool for a quirky poetic narrative about *Roy and Silo's Gay Divorce*. By drawing on clips from *March of the Penguins*, they constructed a postmodern twist on traditional “family values,” featuring Emperor Penguins Roy and Silo who upheld the right to gay marriage and divorce. Greyson and Wall used the historic, century-old public baths inventively filling lockers, shower rooms and halls with small monitors that showed sequences of the narrative. The pool area was imaginatively decorated with plastic blow-up penguins, and it doubled as a warm haven for attendees.

5:35—Returning to OCAD I was among a thousand people to get a breakfast of pancakes. While waiting in the lineup I swapped stories with several people, and the buzz permeating every conversation was the same, everyone felt magic in this night—some likened it to a street party, an art celebration or a new festive time of the year.

6:15—I ended the night by returning to Yorkville for *Bedtime Tales: Fables and Fantasies, 2006*, a selection of readings by established and emerging writers. It was like hearing bedtime stories being read out loud before going to sleep, and made a perfect ending to a fantastic night.

7:15—Staying out until dawn was definitely the way to go. I stumbled home tired and yet strangely revitalized after experiencing

Toronto’s most significant art event of this century.

In the end the miserable weather did not derail *Nuit Blanche*. Almost half a million people braved the rain to experience a sleepless night of art, and in doing so, found a little magic.

Janis Cole holds an MFA in Documentary Media from Ryerson University. She is a professor at OCAD University, and her award-winning documentaries include Calling the Shots, about the working lives of women filmmakers.

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