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# Zombies in Condoland

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## **Zombies in Condoland**

By Laura Levin and Kim Solga

“Zombies in Condoland” is a series of night actions that mimic a film screening set for a low-budget horror film such as the type made famous by George Romero whose latest film, “Diary of a Zombie”, was filmed in Toronto.

Anyone can participate and be a zombie. Zombies are encouraged to come in character - nurse zombie, business person zombie, geek zombie, sports zombie. They are encouraged also to do their makeup en route, in cafes, bars, and mass transit. There will also be make-up tents and zombie clothing available on site. Instructional videos are included on the website: [jillianmcdonald.net/zombie](http://jillianmcdonald.net/zombie).

(McDonald)

We’ve been thinking together about issues of urban performance in Toronto for the last year and a half. So when Harry Lane asked us to contribute to the CTR Festivals issue, we thought it would be an ideal opportunity to collect our thoughts. We’ve decided to organize these thoughts around one representative festival – *Nuit Blanche* – that epitomizes the questions that continue to intrigue us about the form and value of this kind of work. In our previous writing on this topic, we’ve tried to help initiate a critical discussion about the ways in which Toronto, official and unofficial, celebrates its “creative” city status. Here, we ask three questions in order to examine what kinds of civic social and cultural labour Toronto’s most participatory street festival performs.

## **Where's the Art?**

It's 11pm on Saturday, October 4, 2008, and we're driving around downtown Toronto looking for *Zombies in Condoland*. According to the *Nuit Blanche* website the undead are supposed to have taken over this part of town, but we can't find a single one. So we drive on to City Hall, where Project Blinkenlights has set up an enormous window installation; passersby manipulate a light show illuminating the windows of City Hall from their cellphones, ostensibly taking control of the processes of civic governance. As with the promised zombie takeover of "condoland," the promotional materials for the festival tell us that "anyone can participate." Yet here, as in many of the environmental artworks on display at the festival, participation feels haphazard, a bit of passing fun; the lights blink, and the crowds walk on.

The emptiness of condoland makes a startling contrast to the throng around the Ontario College of Art and Design. There, we wait almost half an hour to trundle past a few kinetic sculptures and photographs labeled *Useless Beauty*. Amidst the human mass, standing at times literally shoulder-to-shoulder with other spectators, it's surprisingly easy to miss the art; few people walking near us seem to notice it. On our way out of the building we stop to watch a video featuring Orlan, the French ordeal artist. Only a handful of people sit in the theatre, many of them dozing, exhausted. They are resting their feet before hitting another festival zone.

What happens when the event that is *Nuit Blanche* eclipses the art that is *Nuit Blanche*? As we followed the crowds and shuffled past installations it became obvious to us that "art" was less the point than the excuse on this night, an excuse for friends to

gather, for an evening of slightly lawless pleasure. And yet the irony of the missing zombies hit us hard: in the bourgeois spaces of the inner downtown core there was, literally, nothing to see. At OCAD – on ordinary days the site of exceptional art making – art was somewhere off to the side, dwarfed by our hurried passing. In fact, at OCAD, there was little art available for viewing, but had there been no art at all we doubt it would have mattered.

*Nuit Blanche* is based on a broad participatory aesthetic: our critical mass makes the event. Everybody is invited to invest in the act of *just being there*. The unspoken assumption is that this act is inherently political – that simply by walking the city at night we take it back, make it safe for art and for ourselves. But is this true? What does this claim imply, and what does it forget or even willfully ignore?

### **Obsessed with the Event**

Eventhood allows spectators to live for a while in the paradox of two impossible desires: to be present in the moment, to savour it, and to save the moment, to still and preserve its power long after it has gone. This is a deliberate strategy for many Live artists, bringing the reception of the artwork into the elusive conditions of the real, where the relation between experience and thought can be tested and rearticulated. (Heathfield 54)

What are the larger social implications of our collective obsession with eventhood? *Nuit Blanche* crystallizes this obsession, at least as it obtains on the streets of Toronto in 2008,

but it is hardly the only example. From the Toronto Psychogeography Society, to the [murmur] free urban story project, to the street parties organized by Newmindspace, the city has over the last few years become home to an expanse of performance practices designed to elicit for participants the desires Heathfield describes as definitively “eventful.” We are the moment; we make the moment; we own the moment. We remember ourselves as the essential content of the moment. The peripheral stuff – the art? – falls out of the frame. At *Nuit Blanche*, this orientation towards event was implicitly celebrated in Daniel Olson’s performance artwork at Yonge-Dundas Square, where spectators were lit up at random by a follow spot, instantly “transforming them into celebrities” and giving them “fifteen seconds of fame.”

Eventhood is a strategy designed to combat live art’s ephemeral qualities; by inviting participants to remember themselves, their embodied experience, as an essential part of the art event, artists encourage a broader remembrance of their own work, and of the work art does in the public sphere. In this sense it is a powerful, provocative strategy. But turning art into event – the experience of the work of art into an experience of the self – also carries risks.

When the event eclipses the art, what do we see? Our experience of *Nuit Blanche* – both our anecdotal experience of being on the streets among the passing crowds and our “professional” experience of viewing the works on offer as trained performance critics – suggests that one thing we *don’t* see, or at least don’t see consistently, is critical content. In Parkdale we came across a group called the Playdead Cult – another incarnation of Toronto’s exploding interest in zombie culture and performance – marching through the streets dressed in homage to the Mexican Day of the Dead. While we can hardly claim to

know the personal, cultural, or racial histories of the marchers, the presence of many apparently Caucasian bodies in cultural drag made us uneasy. What kind of unexamined appropriation motivated this event? The participants were hardly a cohesive group: they included those in sombre death masks, those dressed as zombies, and a variety of hangers-on. For many, this march seemed little more than an excuse to make a lot of noise on the street late at night. This is radically democratized performance art; it is also art that brazenly performs its refusal to care from what traditions it steals, and what that theft might imply. In Parkdale, an immigrant-heavy community where many new Canadians fight every day for social, political, and economic recognition, we could not help but wonder what *living* conditions and experiences the fun of “Playdead” inadvertently obscured. Rather than facilitating an engagement with existing neighborhood inhabitants – taking up the site-specific promise of an urban festival like *Nuit Blanche* – events of this kind tend to mask over the neighborhood, an ironic process embodied in the many forms of participatory cosplay and masquerade that we saw throughout the evening.

One of the central themes of *Nuit Blanche*, as articulated by its organizers, is to assert public ownership of the streets. (Interestingly, the phrase “Reclaim the streets,” which has historically functioned as a call to political action, is frequently adopted by members of the emerging zombie movement; see *Zombie Liberation Front*). But many of this year’s events seemed uninterested in those who already live and work on the streets. Their presence was regarded as little more than curiosity, as something that might make the artwork more “interesting” (see Milroy), rather than as something that might trouble that work, or challenge its assumed right to occupy the street unquestioningly. In

Parkdale, we passed a window installation, *Salon des Refusés*, in which women were bound by men in balaclavas. The brief artist statement suggested all parties were consenting and pleasure-seeking, yet the women gazed out the window, over our heads, looking bored (another set of theatrical zombies). There, in one of Toronto's struggling inner-city neighbourhoods, *Nuit Blanche* made the night safe for a glibly patriarchal sexual fantasy. Whether that safety extended to the real sex workers who normally inhabit the streets in this area remains an open question.

While we reveled in the evening's eventhood – how often do you see the undead taking over a few city blocks, or groups of yuppies out at midnight in Parkdale with their baby strollers? – we also wondered if the obsession with *Nuit Blanche* as event (or, in Lyotard's words, as a happening that “disrupts any pre-existing referential frame” [Readings xxiii]) might actually be making the city as such *invisible*. The sense of city as ghost surfaced as we watched people “play dead” in a neighborhood often associated with crime and gun violence; as we watched women play at being bound and gagged in a neighborhood where the forces of gentrification threaten to sweep sex workers off the street. Standing before the *Salon de Refuses*, an artwork that purported to do little more than “capture the essence of the human form through sculpture” (Lord Morpheus), thereby radically decontextualizing the female body, we wondered what it would mean to think about the cultural work accomplished by *Nuit Blanche* in a different way. What could it mean to read this event, following Tracy Davis, as a slice of “performative time,” as an event space carved out within a larger set of city spaces, a space containing multiple layers of past, present, and future?

## **From Zombie to Community**

Our concerns with *Nuit Blanche* lie not with the idea of the event itself, which we both support and enjoy; rather, our concerns lie with its apparent lack of critical consciousness in its current incarnation. We firmly believe that when art meets the street on the massive, seemingly democratic scale that is *Nuit Blanche*, it has an ethical as well as a creative obligation to do so with a carefully considered awareness of how its purported “reclamation” engages, implicitly and explicitly, with the community that surrounds it. Right now, Toronto’s *Nuit Blanche* rides an awkward border between pleasurable nighttime play and the temporarily, willfully suspended recognition that, for many, much of the city is not safe at night, let alone a pleasure. The city at night is also a place of labour for those who work the “graveyard shift,” and who thus may find themselves excluded from Toronto’s ever-playing creative class on nights like this one. Our final question then emerges: how can *Nuit Blanche* evolve into an event that is more than absent spectacle, more than the ghost of art layered onto the ghost of the city’s core?

We have no immediate answers to this question, but we want to end with a possibility. Already, *Nuit Blanche* embeds a cultural and economic engagement with community that might become a much larger part of the event as it grows. *Nuit Blanche* gets people who ordinarily compartmentalize their Toronto into “mine” and “theirs,” “safe” and “unsafe,” out onto foreign streets, riding public transit, and spending their entertainment dollars on small business owners in neighbourhoods they might otherwise never see. In the Distillery District, many of the artists’ studios in the Case Goods Warehouse were open for business, as were many restaurants and bars in Parkdale, which has long been a scary, no-go zone in the popular Toronto imagination. *Nuit Blanche* got,



by some estimates, almost a million people out on the streets; that's a critical mass of Torontonians seeing their "other" city with different eyes, perhaps planning a return visit. The organizers of *Nuit Blanche* might make this encounter with the other city a stronger focus of their curatorial efforts in years to come, supporting a range of initiatives – commercial and performative – that ask spectators to actually engage with those local spaces and bodies that lie between installed art projects, that ask us to consider what it really means to take back the streets.

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