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I Turn My (Digital) Camera On

**Thoughts on *Nuit Blanche*, Toronto, Canada,
September 30 – October 1, 2006**

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Despite the wet and dreary weather, the inaugural [Scotiabank Nuit Blanche](#) attracted more than 425,000 visitors bustling on the streets of downtown Toronto. At what is promised to be “the sunset-to-sunrise celebration of contemporary art,” the event offered Torontonians everything from [provocative bedtime stories](#) (*Bedtime Tales: Fables and Fantasies*, 2006), [“ballroom” dancing](#) (*Ballroom Dancing* by Darren O’Donnell, 2006) to an [all-night swimming party](#) (*Night Swim* by Christie Pearson, 2006). Modeled after the highly

successful event launched in the city of Paris in 2002,¹ Toronto's *Nuit Blanche* is divided into three zones (Zone A: Bloor/Yorkville; Zone B: McCaul/University; and Zone C: Queen Street West), in turn providing more than 100 access points to showcase a wide selection of contemporary artworks by both Canadian and international talents.

Having spent more than four hours in Zone A, I am not only astonished by the number of people spilling at every street corners, but also by the number of mobile/digital devices being utilized to capture the ephemerality and the spontaneity entrenched in a public art event like *Nuit Blanche*. As a sudden pillow fight tournament turns up near the south end of the Royal Ontario Museum, a young woman, with a cell phone in hand, quickly snaps pictures as her friend is recruited to participate in a [Pillow Fight League](#) tryout.

Later, at Philosopher's Walk (between Hoskins Avenue and Bloor Street West) where the much-discussed installation *Fog in Toronto # 71624* (Fujiko Nakaya, 2006) is situated, the dense, thick "atmospheric sculpture" is adorned with what appears to be dozens of small, blinking rectangular lights. The illuminations turn out to be visitors trying to photograph the ever-changing sculpture on their lit, camera phone screens. Although the deployment of handheld device is not an anticipated, participatory component, however, this technological intervention does not deter, but rather, assist to address the theme of the project.

¹ Other international cities with their own versions of *Nuit Blanche* include: Montreal, Canada ([Nuit blanche à Montréal](#)); Riga, Latvia ([Baltā Nakts](#)); Rome, Italy ([La Notte Bianca](#)); Madrid Spain ([La Noche en Blanco](#)), and Brussels, Belgium ([La Nuit Blanche](#)). For more information about the original *Nuit Blanche* in Paris, please click [here](#).

Nakaya's atmospheric sculpture is "created by artificially produced water fog² and shaped instantaneously by the microclimate of the place where it was created" (*Nuit Blanche* pamphlet, 2006). With this design, her sculpture becomes both "a phenomenon and an artifact" (ibid), or as the event pamphlet describes—an "articulated" nature since the installation can only materialize when both its natural and technical components are working together. The notion of "articulated" nature is compelling, not only because it provides a conceptual framework to appreciate Nakaya's works. But also in an unexpected context, it operates as a fitting analogy to describe how the converges of handheld devices (like camera phones and digital cameras) and user-driven applications (like Flickr) afford the public with a "collaborative canvas" (Tapscott and Williams, 2007) to direct how an event like *Nuit Blanche* can be (re)experienced.

In a recent essay entitled "The Autobiographical Impulse and Mobile Imaging: Toward a Theory of Autobiometry," Heidi Rae Cooley contends that while mobile imaging can be categorized as an autobiographic practice, the resulting visuals do not necessarily follow a narrative logic. By utilizing folksonomy (tagging) as an example, Cooley argues that when individuals assign tags on Flickr to interpret, and in turn, provide access to other images with similar user-driven descriptions, this first person form of documentation encourages subjectivity to emerge from a "database logic" that also "privileges techniques of selection and (re)combination" (Cooley, 2006; Manovich, 2001).

² According to a Canadian Press story, "Nakaya creates the chemical-free fog for her atmospheric projects by using a system that forces water through nozzles mounted on frames. A California-based engineer created the machine for her in 1970."

With digital technologies becoming increasingly accessible (both economically and technically speaking), many media theorists have already examined how the practice to remix and to juxtapose existing pop cultural artifacts enable the public to express personal concerns/desires that are often dismissed in mass media (see Jenkins, 1992, 2006 and Russell, Ito, Richmond and Tutters, 2006). By recognizing that user-generated content (UGC) continues to saturate every crevice of the public's imagination, in this dawning age of "prosumerism"³—art organizations must take up these social and technological habits and recontextualize them to fulfill their own interests. If a central mandate of *Nuit Blanche* is to exhibit contemporary art on an inclusive, rather than exclusive platform, this public willingness to share, to participate and to communicate can be appropriated to engage audiences in a more personal and provocative fashion.

Take for example the current exhibition [*We Are All Photographers Now!*](#) at the Musée de l'Elysée Lausanne. By acknowledging that digital photography is transforming into a daily practice, the project challenges the shifting boundaries between artists, curators, and audience members by soliciting and displaying the works of amateur photographers in a module of the exhibition entitled the "The Flux" (Each week, one hundred images will be randomly selected, and will be exhibited in the museum space. For anyone who is interested in submitting images for this event which runs until May 20, 2007, please click [here](#) for more information).

³ In *Wikinomics*, Tapscott and Williams define "prosumer" as a special group of consumers that are interested in "co-creating goods and services rather than simply consuming end-product" (2007, 1). Tapscott first coined the terminology in his 1996 book, *The Digital Economy*.

In an unexpected twist, a keen contributor decides to extend the parameter of the project by instituting an [Unofficial Flickr Group](#) to virtually showcase images that have been submitted to this ever-changing exhibition. This audience-motivated initiative is of interest to the current discussion because it explicitly demonstrates how photo-sharing websites like Flickr can be repurposed into self-organized, user-driven art archives.⁴ Of course, to reshape UGC to correspond with the mandates of art organizations will demand these institutions to “forsake the traditional ways of thinking about [their] collection” (Harcup and Nesbitt, 2006), however, by embracing rather than rejecting these alternative ideas, it is clear that museums and galleries can also leverage UGC to enrich their existing marketing and collecting initiatives.⁵

Although the official organizers did not deploy UGC to track public responses to *Nuit Blanche*, however, with a few mouse clicks on [Flickr](#) (for example, search for the tags “Toronto” and “Nuit Blanche”), the civic enthusiasm towards the event is clearly documented. As a means to tap into these peer resources, a popular city blog even launches its own [Flickr Nuit Blanche Photo Contest](#). To recall the concepts of remix and juxtaposition, in *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich invokes the DJ as a cultural figure that best embodies the selection logic because his/her craft best exploits the “malleability” of new media (2002, 134). Within an

⁴ It is important to recognize that hierarchical structures also exist in social applications like Flickr. With that said, the parameters of these photo databases are not pre-determined, but rather, they emerge through social interactions, or a peer review process (for example: by commenting, assigning favourite links) amongst Flickr members. For an applicable analysis of *Slashdot*, please see Yochai Benkler’s discussion in *The Wealth of the Networks* (2006, 75-90).

⁵ For more information on the similarities between museums and mass media, please refer to Werner Schewiebenz’s paper “The ‘virtual museum’: New perspectives for museums to present objects and information using the Internet as a knowledge base and communication system.”

increasingly Web 2.0⁶ environment, it can be argued that when individuals turn on their digital cameras, they too, are abiding by the renewed rituals of digital photography—that is to select and combine their experiences, and subsequently, create a new platform (via Flickr) where public memories are perpetually rewritten. In this framework, the images uploaded on Flickr do not merely capture *Nuit Blanche* within a specific moment in time and space, but much like Nakaya's sculpture, they become “a phenomenon and an artifact”—consistently shifting with every view count, comment, and favourite link they receive.

As I navigate through the 3000 plus images on Flickr alongside the visual/textual content on the on the official archive created by the [Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art](#) (CCCA), it becomes abundantly clear that both of these websites filter *Nuit Blanche* in a distinctive yet complimentary light. While the former succeeds in showcasing a more [playful](#) and [subjective](#) side of the occasion by highlighting “an un-unified public, comprised of disjunctive conversations and incommensurate points of view” (Kwon, 2002); the latter, accomplishes its mandate to facilitate public knowledge and appreciation by closely positioning *Nuit Blanche* within its [official discourse](#) (for example, the site provides the public with curatorial/artists statements and maps of the event).

At the intersection of these two frameworks, the tension that emerges does demand art institutions to reassess their roles and responsibilities to their audiences within a virtual, online

⁶ On December 10, 2006, Tim O'Reilly provides his latest definition of Web 2.0 as “the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the Internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them. (This is what I've elsewhere called ‘harnessing collective intelligence.’)” (O'Reilly, 2006).

environment. It is important to emphasize that with the proliferation of peer production, this paradigmatic shift does not signal an end to authoritative, well-written content created on behalf of these art organizations. However, by harnessing a more collaborative methodology, where public opinions and institutional knowledge can be simultaneously showcased, this blurring of professional and amateur boundaries is something art institutions must accept if they are truly invested in creating a relevant and enriching relationship with their audiences.

In their presentation entitled “Attaining the Holy Grail: How to Encourage Wider Engagement With Museum Collections Through Participation In New Media Projects,” Claire Harcup and Mark Nesbitt contend that interactive projects can only become successful when they are designed to align with the needs, desires and concerns of their target audiences (2006). For many museums and galleries, the initial decision to move cultural assets into an online space is motivated by the increasing presence the Internet has on our day-to-day lives. While I do not want to imply that official databases like those set up by the CCCA are becoming obsolete (nor do I want to overstate the advantages of peer production, especially since the issue of copyright has not been addressed), however, in a media landscape that increasingly encourages “participation” rather than “observation” (Tapscott and Williams, 2007, 38), art institutions must come in terms with the fact that a simple “click and browse” website will eventually have no effect in seeking and sustaining public interest.

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Biography

Janice Leung is currently completing her MA in Communication and Culture at York University. She graduated in 2004 with an Honours BA from York in Communication Studies and Psychology, and has worked in various non-profit arts organizations in Toronto including the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, Harbourfront Centre and the Art Gallery of York University. Her thesis is concerned with how the convergences of mobile and networked technologies are shifting the practices and pleasures in music fandom.