

A fun night at the art circus

After taking in dumpster art and an inflatable locust, **Sarah Milroy** wishes Toronto's institutions had given the event more thought

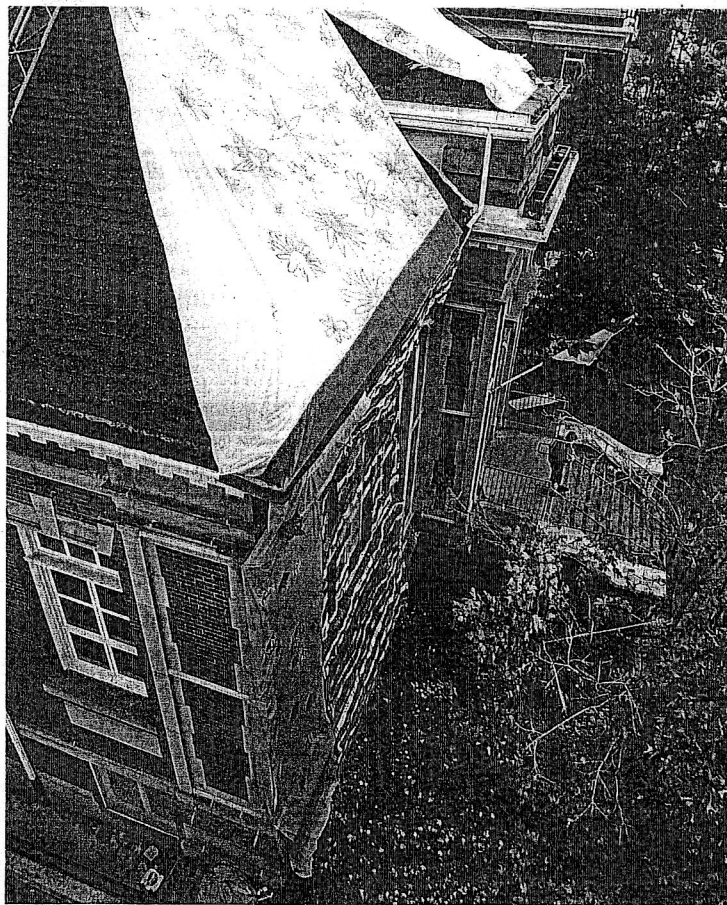
Is it a party or is it art?" Under a waning harvest moon on Saturday night, my sister, a friend and I were navigating our way through a maze of back alleys off of Huron Street in downtown Toronto, and we were hearing the sounds of people congregating. Following the signs for a Nuit Blanche project, *ThunderEgg Alley: A Dumpster Diver's Paradise*, by an artist named Swintak, we rounded a corner and came across a backyard party. It looked like 150 souls crammed into a space the size of a mini-laundromat, with plastic lights strung overhead and the beer flowing freely.

It was nearing midnight, and we had already seen a lot of the projects that had been commissioned for Toronto's second Nuit Blanche, and we knew enough to know that some of the projects don't look like projects at all. But this looked a little bit too much like a party so we forged on, turned the next corner and bingo: another party, but this one was taking place in a large dumpster.

Climbing up and looking in over the side, you could see a crush of people drinking and eating potato chips in a furnished interior, complete with sofas and working lamps. A concierge in evening attire stood nearby taking reservations for the dumpster hotel (was this the artist?), and, around back, a woman was administering a facial and manicure to a prone woman whose head was concealed inside a facial steamer. The atmosphere was ebullient, but I found my sister's question hanging in the air: Is it a party or is it art?

The answer: It's a little bit of both, but with definite leanings towards the party side. Traversing the city for seven hours, we took in dozens of projects, but only a handful stick in the mind as fully realized projects. Still, everyone seemed to be having a great time.

At Lamport Stadium, on King Street West, we saw the giant inflatable locust by Japanese artist Noboru Tsubaki serving as a bouncy castle for drug-glazed twentysomethings, who leaped and frolicked on the giant bug with no apparent compunction. (I



Janet Morton's *Femmebomb*, a fabric cladding of a public health building on Queen Street West: Why didn't she wrap the whole building? TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

midnight performance by Camille Turner at the Women's Art Resource Centre felt like a drop-in social scene, a place to crash and drink beer. Attentiveness to the artist's glacially-paced performance as one of four cape-clad extraterrestrial visitors was lax to nil. Annie MacDonnell's *Aurora Readiness Centre* in the basement of the U of T Faculty of Architecture, was a half-baked recreation of a real 1960s bomb shelter for city officials (dismantled in the 1990s), but the simulation was weak and only partially

(or skill?) to do the thing right. Janet Morton's *Femmebomb* (a fabric cladding of a public health building on Queen Street West) was only a partial success; one couldn't help but wonder why she didn't complete the idea by wrapping the entire building instead of just the front façade. As the evening wore on, there were too many moments like this – moments when you had to struggle to find your way to something only to find yourself underwhelmed.

There were, however, some

ton's "listening choir" performance at the Ontario College of Art and Design at the start of the evening, where she lined up with students to listen to the ambient sound in the art school, thronging with visitors. A beatific assembly of tranquil souls in the midst of the hubbub, their stillness was a little startling, calling you back to a kind of mindfulness in the midst of all the hoop-haw.

Adad Hannah's video installation *Traces*, in The Rex Hotel, was beautifully considered and beautifully installed, a series of time-based looping videos that show people (some of them Rex regulars) holding various poses in the bar – a band, a pair of young lovers on the brink of a kiss, a studious girl reading a book on museum security, and so forth.

White Line Light (2002), at the Old Police Station in the urban badlands of lower Strachan Avenue, was a menacing and compelling union of sight (two incandescent parallel white lines suspended in space) and sound (variations on a disturbing techno hum) that together made your hair stand on end. This was one of the evening's best sited works, seeming perfectly suited to the marginal zone of the city in which we discovered it.

Likewise *Non-Specific Threat*, by Northern Irish artist Willie Doherty. Staged upstairs in an abandoned garage at the corner of Bay Street and Grenville Street, the piece reverberated with a sense of barely suppressed violence. As the camera circles a bald headed man, we hear his voiceover intoning phrases that suggest a sort of global Armageddon ("there will be no flights," "there will be no computers") and a host of other blunt statements that make of him a kind of all-purpose alien, available to be feared or despised. ("I am unknowable. I am beyond reason.") Sound and image come together wonderfully in this piece; the audio speakers were up to the task and properly installed, and the sound was thunderous, gravely, getting under your skin and to your core. I had seen this work before, in a gallery context, but this presentation enhanced it immeasurably. I saw a thing or

evening. At 2:00 a.m., it suddenly felt like it was time to go home. I had found the aesthetic rush I had been looking for.

A thought for next year.

True, some of the real delights of the evening were the small things, like the stuffed architectural model of the city of Toronto by the UpBag collective, which we discovered by chance in a hallway at 401 Richmond. (I particularly enjoyed the Mies towers rendered in black corduroy, and the knitted CN Tower.) But the big guns – The Power Plant, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, the Royal Ontario Museum – were all more or less passive (throwing dance parties or staying open late to show your regular programming doesn't count), leaving it to Barbara Fischer at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, at Hart House, University of Toronto, to be the only museum director in town to catch the Nuit Blanche fever. Her Night School program was packed with onlookers when we checked in.

What's wrong with these people? We shouldn't really need to apply the heart paddles – they are supposed to be the folks that believe in art, after all – but if heart paddles are indeed required, maybe the city/sponsors of Nuit Blanche or other patrons should consider grants to these leading centres to fund one major one-night-only project either in their gallery space or out in the city. (How about \$20,000 each?)

These institutions have the curators on hand who can make good decisions and who know how to install works properly, and it would likely provide a core group of unequivocally major pieces by accomplished artists to anchor the night.

It needed it. The great thing about Nuit Blanche is the way in which it mobilizes a vast public, making the city a canvas for artistic embellishment. But I felt some queasiness, as I made my rounds, that such a large public had been engaged (hooray) but not really given the hit of great work that the occasion deserved (boo). Happily, this is a fixable problem.

As the evening wore on, there were too many moments like this – moments when you had to struggle to find your way to something only to find yourself underwhelmed.