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## NUIT BLANCHE



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### Nuit Blanche fatigue

#### The ArtStars\* team declare war on Toronto's fourth all-night contemporary-art thing

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BY DAVID BALZER September 30, 2009 17:09

ArtStars\* at Nuit Blanche  
Oct. 3, 6:55pm-sunrise.  
Projection at Art Gallery of Ontario, 317 Dundas W. Roving reports throughout the city. See [artstarstv.com](http://artstarstv.com) or [scotiabanknuitblanche.ca](http://scotiabanknuitblanche.ca).

This is the way Nadja Sayej prepares for Nuit Blanche. Exactly two weeks and one day before the fateful night, she is in the back of a rented Winnebago parked in front of Rolly's Garage on Ossington. It's the opening for Derek Mainella's weekend-only group show "The New Voice of the Gutter"—and it's filled out, raucously, by the usual hordes from the strip and from the tail-end of TIFF. (*Entourage's* Adrian Grenier is here.)

Sayej sits on the Winnebago's fur-lined backseat, mic in hand, in front of video artist Jeremy Bailey's lights and camera, interviewing all and sundry about their picks and pans from Nuit Blanches past. Her questions are typically blunt; there is a lot of gesticulation; at times she emerges from her trailer, like *Divine from Pink Flamingos*, to drag someone back to her lair. By the time I get to her it's around 1am. I suggest painter Margaux Williamson come in for a chat; she does; I look on as Williamson answers ardently and Sayej slumps increasingly downwards, her *Sally Jessy glasses* moving closer to the tip of her nose, her Jenny Jones skirt suit riding up outrageously. It's a patent display of exhibitionism, but the point is made: getting to the bottom of Toronto art-scene ennui is hard work.

It's difficult to believe that Sayej ever actually gets tired, though. Since May, she, Bailey and editor Ryan Edwards have been focusing their ample energies on *ArtStars\**, a YouTube show dedicated to covering — and, yes, uncovering — the local art-party circuit in two-minute segments. The group's Facebook-vlog-PDF manifesto is a litany of the pugnacious, the arrogant, the hilarious and the trenchant: they are the "TMZ for the art scene"; they want to "show you the fun side of the world onscreen"; they are the "leaders of the new art criticism," and "barge into galleries, ask the tough questions (charmingly, of course) and shatter the wall between the audience and the vague and elusive 'art star' that has protected artists — and the art world — for yonks."

It's been a brief, but at the very least noted, tenure. The perpetually turned-out, charismatic Sayej, with her penchant for all things lamé, her disarming sneer and her (how to put this delicately?) formidable rack, has become a gonzo presence at openings — not unlike Paul H-O, host of *Gallery Beat*, the early-'90s New York cable-access show which *ArtStars\** closely resembles. *ArtStars\** has 714 fans on Facebook, 626 followers on Twitter, and its YouTube episodes, which, to date, total 18, have an average of about 620 hits each. These are small numbers, but their uniformity gives a good indication of just how contained (and, possibly, governable) the local art scene is.

Sayej — who has a painting degree from OCAD ("I'm almost Lee Krasner but not. Ellsworth Kelly. More Peter Halley") and got kicked out of Ryerson J-school for "being too wild" — may not be a household name, but if she hadn't already made her mark as a visual-arts freelancer for *The Globe and Mail* and *The New York Times*, she certainly has now. A number of incriminating moments as captured by *ArtStars\** have turned into insider lore: MOCCA's David Liss' drunken, voluble fixation with Sayej's breasts at the Power Ball; Douglas Coupland's taciturn, Warholian unwillingness to be on camera for his Clark & Faria opening this past summer, resulting in a Sayej ambush and a part-amicable, part-awkward hug. (See sidebar below for more classic moments.) The momentum has been enough for *ArtStars\** to host their own TIFF 09 party at the Drake, featuring *Andy Rourke* from *The Smiths* as DJ.

What *ArtStars\** has planned for this Saturday will, one hopes, dwarf these thus-far subtle maneuverings. According to Sayej, they're "declaring war on Nuit Blanche." Why? If you have to ask, you've never been.

"There are too many fog machines!" exclaims Sayej over beers at Zelda's with her two colleagues. "Too many fog machines and too many light sculptures." And only a militant approach can address such alarming redundancies. "The whole thing is a response to the fact that arts reporting is often pushed to the back pages with the classifieds," she says, "while Afghanistan and burning buildings are always on A1."

"I'm curious whether the general public's impression has gone down, or whether it's just within the arts community," adds Bailey. "I think, in the arts community, it's way down. The projects aren't getting better; they're getting lazier. The big-name artists who are coming in are just token selling-points. The only good thing I can say about it is that it's better than Luminato — which is the worst arts festival I've ever seen, in terms of the impression you get while it's happening. In the arts community, people are pretty jaded; there's just nothing exciting. Why have 200 bad Nuit Blanche projects when you can have 10 really amazing ones?"

These and other gripes will be addressed, analyzed and, perhaps, refuted during *ArtStars\** live, all-hours, guerilla-style coverage, to be projected — in a programming coup for the trio — on the side of the AGO. A full itinerary for the night has been arranged (and is being kept fairly secret), with interviews and crowd wanderings, as well as filler footage taped from their night at Rolly's. There will be dispatches from local critics like Rosemary Heather (former editor of *C Magazine*), Alexandra Shimo (of *Maclean's*) and yours truly, via phone-ins and tweets, to be displayed in a Reuters-like ticker on an LED banner below the projection. (Sayej gives me a sample tweet, "JEFF KOONS HAS ARRIVED VIA WHITE LIMO AT YONGE AND DUNDAS SQUARE": the prototypical art star is lending the city one of his floating bunnies and may show up, according to Nuit Blanche publicists.) Sayej also promises several *Borat*-style entrapments, including trying to find Scotiabank employees and testing their knowledge of local and international art-scene trivia.

But if *ArtStars\** has declared war on Nuit Blanche, is it a just one? And if they're the new voice of art criticism — an attempt to depose an establishment sadly caught up in meaningless theory, academic bureaucracy and status symbolism — are they really offering something more intelligent? Indeed, can *ArtStars\** put its own propaganda and self-promotion — acute symptoms, to be sure, of the scene they're trying to expose — in service of productive satire?

"We're usually not out to make a specific point," says Bailey. "That kind of ego is not implied in the show; we're not here to advance a movement like Clement Greenberg or to destroy another one; we're here to reflect the cultural landscape. I always respected Nadja as a writer for that reason: she wasn't writing a thesis about my scene; she was writing about my scene, and telling the truth."

"We weren't even going to do Nuit Blanche," notes Edwards, a self-declared art-world outsider, who only came to *ArtStars\** as a high school friend of Sayej's and is, by day, a reality-television editor. "But we were invited to do it. So that's where the war lies. Based on our style and the way we handle art, I don't think we thought the AGO would be interested. We presented them with a proposal that was a bit outlandish and they went for it. So we're doing it."

Sayej follows by mentioning that art criticism is, lately, "something [she's] tried to run away from. Saying we're the new leaders of video art criticism may sound ridiculous," she concedes, "but, I mean, art criticism has become something ridiculous in itself." Critics are kowtowing to artists, either supporting them through jargon-laden descriptions masked as reviews, or through glammed-up dispatches on the scene. She repeats that it's not the works or the artists she's most interested in, but the audience of contemporary art, one that now comes out as much, if not more, for the party as for the content — and there's no better example of this than Nuit Blanche.

But just how democratic is *ArtStars\**? Sayej is certainly not above mocking the hoi polloi ("Nobody cares about art; that's what *ArtStars\** is all about," she says snidely in their *Extermination Music Night* episode), but only, it seems, if she deems them part of the problem. Perhaps, then, her biggest strength — on rampant display in her show and, fingers crossed, her best weapon against Nuit Blanche — is her ability to parrot the tyranny of the general viewer, who can dismiss a feckless work of art through the sheer force of a sentence or two. Regardless, right now, her clearest, tallest mission — other than making *ArtStars\** huge — is to expose and bitchslap the wanton pretension of the scene.

And, for all this, she still claims to believe in it. "I think all the stuff you'd want to know about is hidden," she says, when asked if she thinks contemporary art can even be good anymore. "And I think you have to discover it. And I think that I'm equipped with the tools as a journalist and that I have a passion for what I cover.

"Trust me, honey," she adds, her fingers forming into her trademark snap. "I've tried to cover environmental stuff; I've tried to cover politics; I've tried to cover music, theatre and dance; but there is nothing else that I can cover correctly. I always fuck it up. Unless it's about art. That's why I'm here."

#### GREATEST HITS

Their YouTube show is only five months old, but *ArtStars\** already has plenty of material to fill up a Webby highlight reel.

##### ArtStars\* 13: Vice Magazine

Views: 790

Beware the prying eye of the *ArtStars\** camera and mic. In this episode, Nadja and Jeremy need only show up to a party to get an onslaught of self-inculpating douchebaggery, including numerous "fuck you"s, a dousing with Löwenbräu, and photographer Dana Goldstein's justification of her work as "an outlook to what's going on right now."

##### ArtStars\* 14: Air-Conditioned Jungle

Views: 506

This year's Nuit Blanche Zone A curator Gregory Elgstrand was responsible for this shamelessly abstruse summer group show at Diaz Contemporary, which Nadja describes before entering as "like, the art scene, like, in the thick." Among the pieces are hand-drawn Trident wrappers littering the ground and a pipe sitting on a crate, which an unsuspecting bystander knocks down. Nadja: "You ruined the art." Unsuspecting bystander: "It sucked anyway."

##### ArtStars\* 11: Jon Sasaki and Jessica Valentin

Views: 582

For this opening at Red Bull 381 Projects, Nadja tries to get Sasaki — responsible for last year's much-loved dancing-mascot Nuit Blanche piece at Lamport stadium — to speak with her. Having initially said yes, he refuses because he's had too much to drink, leaving a flushed Valentin to muddle through an explication of her own work.

##### ArtStars\* 4: Brenda Goldstein's Pleasure Addicts

Views: 647

Nadja and Jeremy check out this eight-hour, feminist-themed event at Toronto Free Gallery, in which this year's Nuit Blanche participant Maria Legault participated. Personalized cupcakes, lying still all night, getting enclosed in wallpaper and blood-curdling screams ensue: definitely a case of *ArtStars\** unofficial mandate of we-go-to-protracted-political-performance-art-so-you-don't-have-to.

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