



NUIT BLANCHE



John Cage and Marcel Duchamp go pawn-to-pawn at the Ryerson Theatre in 1968.

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Sarah Robayo Sheridan: Reunion New Mercer Union director restages legendary John Cage/Marcel Duchamp match-up

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BY DAVID BALZER September 29, 2010 10:09

Oct 2, 7pm-7am. Ryerson Theatre, 43 Gerrard E. Part of Scotiabank Nuit Blanche, at various locations throughout the city. www.scotiabanknuitblanche.ca. Related reading: Nuit Blanche preview — the annual artists poll Follow @EYE WEEKLY on Twitter during Nuit Blanche for our all night -review!

Nuit Blanche turns five this year, and Sarah Robayo Sheridan is not only raising a glass (er, brown-bagged bottle?) with the rest of the city, but reminding us of what we should be toasting. The newish Director of Exhibitions and Publications at Mercer Union, who has been responsible for engaging, creative shows such as 2009's "We Interrupt This Program" on classic avant-garde advertising interventions, is the curator of one the evening's most ambitious programmes, Zone B's "The Night of Future Past."

The works under Robayo Sheridan's auspices have a decidedly local focus, still refreshing for a Nuit Blanche that continues to set its sights on marquee art. (Just look at the other, western half of Zone B, not curated by Robayo Sheridan, which features work by Daniel Lanois, Lee Ranaldo and Dan Graham.) Mammalian Diving Reflex's Nuit Market, for instance, is a collaboration with Toronto Weston Flea Market, and nestles a bazaar into Victoria Street Lane off of Yonge Street.

There's also Robayo Sheridan's own Reunion, a compelling cue for Torontonians to look back at their city's ongoing engagement with nighttime conceptual art and, indeed, at the whole notion of marquee art within that milieu. The main idea is to restage, reimagine and re-examine the unsung performance that experimental composer John Cage and avant-garde godfather Marcel Duchamp held at the Ryerson Theatre in early March, 1968.

Part of Ryerson University's SightSoundSystems festival, the performance constituted Cage, Duchamp and Duchamp's wife Alexina, a.k.a. "Teeny," playing chess onstage on an electronic board, and thus making concrete music with the help of composers David Behrman, Lowell Cross, Gordon Mumma and David Tudor. Panned by the local press — the Toronto Star's Robert Fulford called it "infinitely boring," with "total non-communication, all around" — the performance was, barring his short curtain call with Merce Cunningham's dance company in Buffalo a month later, Duchamp's last public appearance.

Robayo Sheridan's restaging of Reunion is not so much a museum piece as a celebration, an avant-garde jamboree. Using her Zone's major-project funds shrewdly, not to bring in one art star but to hold a kind of performance symposium, she has managed to plan a rich 12-hour event featuring many key local and international figures. Among them is Alison Knowles, a hero of Robayo Sheridan's who was involved with Fluxus and Something Else Press and who, here, will present "Loose Pages," a sound-piece performance in which her artist-daughter, Jessica Higgins, will dress in pages made of cotton and flax that will shuffle as she walks. Eighty-one-year-old Takako Saito, another woman associated with Fluxus, is flying in from Disseldorf. Behrman, Mumma and Cross will participate by revisiting some of their original 1968 compositions. Other names include chess champions Pascal Charbonneau and Jennifer Shahade, the latter of whom has written both on women in chess (the awesomely titled Chess Bitch) and on Duchamp's prodigious late-life career in the game (Marcel Duchamp: The Art of Chess).

A young Adrienne Clarkson kicks it all off, via period footage from CBC's The Day It Is, which features her weaving among the avant-garde statesmen in a beehive and miniskirt.

"One of my first thoughts was, 'My god, there are no two figures I could bring into the fold who would be a Cage or Duchamp of today,'" says Robayo Sheridan. "But that's faulty logic. We no longer live in that moment, and it's kind of a relief. It makes sense that you find traces here and there of influence, among a huge array of living artists today."

Thus the telling inclusion of (more) women. "The truth is that Duchamp beat Cage within the first half-hour [of Reunion]," Robayo Sheridan points out. "And then Teeny and Cage proceeded to play for the next three hours of the event. The match wasn't finished. They finished it at home in New York several weeks later. Teeny didn't have that prominence, and yet she had way more stage time than Marcel."

Robayo Sheridan has scheduled the event as a succession of discrete performances and screenings so viewers can select which part they'd like to show up for, or can prove their avant-garde chops by staying the whole night. Robayo Sheridan jokes about Cage's famed durational performance of Erik Satie's Vexations, actually being played at this year's Nuit Blanche by Martin Arnold at Brookfield Place, for which Cage instituted a reverse admission policy: the longer you stay, the less you pay. Such tactics are, thankfully, rendered moot by Nuit Blanche's all-free policy, but Robayo Sheridan confirms her commitment to having the event go beyond mere spectacle.

"Participatory art so often involves cheap thrills. We can't foster that as a notion of what cultural practice is. I've tried to harness [Nuit Blanche] in a way I think is meaningful to local history. I hope it will have some kind of reach beyond the short 12 hours of being there together."

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