



One Night In Paris: An Annual, Nocturnal Art Show, Called ‘Sleepless Night’

*The “Nuit Blanche” is an annual art exhibition with a difference. To start with, it’s for one night only – but then it is from 7pm – 7am. With about a million visitors, viewing its digital art installations scattered across the city, we spoke to some of the organizers about directing, what many event planners might see, as a logistical nightmare.*

Taking its name from the French tradition of forfeiting a night’s sleep to party or chat, known as a ‘nuit blanche’ or white night, this highly original, exciting art event, held in the first week of October, is now in its 6th year. It allows locals and tourists alike, to discover unusual and remarkable spots in the city while viewing contemporary art installations and performance pieces. Throughout the cultural night-fest, many galleries, museums, libraries, monuments, places of worship, tourist sites, parks, cinemas, gardens, hospitals and universities stay open. Artists are invited to express their imaginations in an experimental and experiential way using light, colour, sound and presentation, splashed across the backdrop of the dark cityscape. The entire event is free to spectators, and the organizers feel that the cost to the city is relatively low, with Paris spending about 1.5 million euro this year – about a euro per person.



Through the ages, Paris has always spread new ideas out into the world... about human rights, about philosophy, literature, art movements, about this year’s hemline; This new Sleepless Night idea has been adopted by several capitals including Brussels, Bucharest, Istanbul, Latvia, Miami Beach, Montreal, Riga, Romania, Rome, Shanghai, Toronto, Turkey and even the “Light Night” in Leeds.

In Paris, the two Artistic Directors, Jerome Delormas and Jean Marie Songy explained that this year, their aim was to blend two contemporary, creative mediums; street art and digital art, within an urban space. They wanted to use one of the underground tube lines to literally transport their audience from one side of Paris to another. Like a treasure hunt, the viewer can discover diversity of architecture and atmospheres, along their ‘journey’. They wanted to present the public with an exciting series of very physical experiences to reflect both the tangible and spiritual aspects of the city at night. The Directors saw their greatest challenge as, “maintaining sufficient artistic tension throughout the entire course, to ensure that by 5am, we could still engage spectators.” Breakfasts are provided at dawn for those who made it through the night!



Back in 2001, when Christophe Girard (in charge of the Parisian Cultural Department for mayor, Bertrand Delanoe, and founder of the event) told them: “Paris is yours, you can do whatever you want, and wherever you want, with the artists of your choice”. It hit them like a bolt; “A nightmare for a town planner”, which the Artistic Directors knew they were not, and didn’t want to become. They knew they were clearly not organising a party either. “Nuit Blanche is a night-course dedicated to artists who want to talk to their city.” Incidentally, Bertrand Delanoe has been Paris’ openly gay mayor since 2001. At the first Nuit Blanche, in 2002, he was stabbed

by a man reported to have said he hated “politicians, the Socialist Party and homosexuals.” The mayor’s wound was not life-threatening and there have been few security threats in successive years.

Steering the event, the Event Department (Département des Evènements et des Actions Nouvelles) has the tough job of coordinating and controlling the event, by close collaboration between the City of Paris, a Producer and the 2 Artistic Directors and their 3 assistants. Planning begins in December (for the following October) as the show “is such a big operation, that is not easily manipulated and plenty of time and thought is required, to get all the necessary cooperation, in a city like Paris”. While it’s surprising that the event department consists of only 4 permanent staff, all departments of the Paris Town Hall are involved in some way. On the actual night, some 300 temporary staff are hired, not counting the participation of hundreds of coordinators and technicians for the artists. With months of planning, involving the Town Council, the Prefecture, the police, public transport and technical services, official security teams are positioned at entrances and exits of each artwork and monitored by the Parisian police.



Keeping the night owls entertained until the ‘wee’ hours includes the bizarre, the touching, the challenging, the beautiful and the avant garde. Much of the work is interactive and this year the Artistic Directors were keen to offer a different perspective to the pilgrims of Paris-by-night; clashing harsh modernity with the romantic and historical. In addition, a strong presence of ‘design’ – be it graphic, object or spatial design. Images were important this year too, from motion design, experimental cinema to (projected) Illustration. “When we initially tried not to be strict in our selection, we ended up with impossible demands and encounters, disappointing proposals and unreasonable requirements ... Now we work with artists, who seem to us, to best understand the scale of the Sleepless Night event; its unique temporary nature and its relationship with the public.” This year some of the work included; a stunning installation of flames at the Tuileries Garden, a question mark made up of large white balloons in the nave of the St Paul-St. Louis Church, actors from the Comedie-Francaise doing a poetry ‘slam’ on the pavement and a sound installation in a public phone booth.



One rather unfortunate incident at this year’s Nuit Blanche was a break-in, by 5 drunken youths, captured on CCTV, at the Musée d’Orsay just before midnight. They punched a 10cm hole in a priceless work by Impressionist master, Claude Monet (Le Pont d’Argenteuil). Monet led the 19th-century Impressionist movement, and is noted for his experimentation with light, colour and perception.

Le Pont d'Argenteuil by Claude Monet is exhibited at the Orsay Museum in Paris. Intruders punched a 10-centimetre tear in the canvas. (Thibault Camus/Associated Press)