



# B

**ZONE B** The intersection of architecture and technology has been a *Nuit Blanche* staple. In this year's instalment, Shirley Madill curates shows that transform T.O. buildings into original works of art.

Artist  
interview  
**BILL  
BURNS**

**THE DOGS  
AND BOATS AND  
AIRPLANES  
CHOIR**  
by Bill Burns,  
Atrium on Bay  
(595 Bay at  
Dundas West).



## BURNS GOES TO THE DOGS

BILL BURNS AND CHILDREN'S VOICES MAKE SOME UNUSUAL NOISE FOR THE DOGS AND BOATS AND AIRPLANE CHOIR **By FRAN SCHECHTER**



WHETHER HE'S PROPOSING IMPOSSIBLE schemes to help endangered wildlife or amassing odd collections, there's something endearing about Bill Burns's absurdist conceptual projects. It's no surprise that he developed *Dogs And Boats And Airplanes* in collaboration with children.

The Saskatchewan-raised, Toronto-based conceptualist has garnered international recognition for *Safety Gear For Small Animals*, an art project/business/museum that addresses habitat degradation by presenting tiny hard hats and life vests and instructions for concealing rescued

creatures in small appliances. *Safety Gear* was featured in a *Simpsons* episode and earned Burns an invitation to work with Australian designers on real-life animal protection.

*Dogs And Boats And Airplanes* began when Burns worked with kids at Alpha Alternative School. "I started photographing dogs a few years back. They interested me because of their intimate connection to human history as workers and companions. At Alpha, our dog sound discussions moved into industrial sound – thus the addition of boats and airplanes."

At MKG127 Burns exhibited deadpan photos of his three subjects plus his dog, boat and plane salt-and-pepper shakers, which he proudly calls the world's largest collection.

"Because the OPP uses dogs and boats and airplanes on a daily basis, I explained to then commissioner Julian Fantino that I'd decided to make a gift of my collection to the esteemed police force. My offer was rejected."

The artist was also gathering audio recordings for the project. The *Nuit Blanche* version, his first purely

sound-based installation, is a collaboration with children age eight to 12 from Lord Lansdowne and Howard Junior Public Schools and their choir director, Alan Gasser. What we hear in the Atrium on Bay – children's voices imitating barks, motorboat put-puts and a CNE Airshow-style fly-by – was recorded last summer. Did the kids enjoy all the noisemaking?

"The kids had fun, I think; I certainly did. We worked from my sound archive, and they developed a repertoire more or less in narrative form. At Alpha a story developed: A dog walks along the beach, goes for a swim, comes out of the water, shakes, drinks some milk. A barge passes. Later a group of dogs comes along yelping and howling. Finally an F18 flies over."

For the current version, "the process went back and forth between choir director Gasser and the children and myself. There was lots of discussion about how to achieve certain sounds, lots of tongue-twisting exercises."

Burns is also planning a book in which dogs, boats and airplanes retell the story of Sergei Eisenstein's Stalin-era film *Ivan The Terrible* and a live 100-voice choral performance in Australia.

How does all this connect with the environmentalism of *Safety Gear*?

"I like to think of dogs as interlocutors between nature and culture. Our origin stories have a lot of references to dogs and dog-men. They're usually associated with guiding us from the walled city into the forest beyond. They are protectors."

"Boats and airplanes, besides being an absurd addition, stand in for advanced industrialism, with its ecological troubles, oil-encrusted sea birds, escapee molecules in our fish and vegetables."

"But a poisoned environment and species loss are just part of the problem. To imagine our literature and cinema inhabited only by people, cats, dogs, coyotes, pigeons, cockroaches and Atlantic salmon is to imagine a culturally impoverished world."