

spacing

COVERING TORONTO'S URBAN LANDSCAPE



splash pads

Wading into water art

by Dale Duncan

photos by Trista Mittermayer

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Imagine you're six years old. Strolling through the park with your mom or dad one day, you discover your neighbourhood wading pool has been taken over by more than 20 helium-filled inflatable killer whales of different sizes, beckoning you to come play with them.

This is exactly what kids living near Trinity Bellwoods Park experienced the morning of June 26. The already popular wading pool was swimming with over-excited children, who were greatly out-numbered by the floating sea mammals. They were so busy bouncing on, and chasing after the whales that they probably never noticed or even cared that they were participating in an art project.

The whales were a part of an installation put together by Gene Threndyle. It was just one of 20 performances and projects that took place between June 25 and 27 for *Wade*, an outdoor art exhibition that celebrated and

brought attention to Toronto wading pools. Curators Christie Pearson and Sandra Rechico, in collaboration with the City and YYZ Artists' Outlet, gathered together 14 artists whose site-specific work was presented across 12 pools scattered throughout the city.

The best thing about this event was the unsuspecting people from the neighbourhoods surrounding each pool that became a part of the performance. As with many public works of art, it was most exciting to observe how the actual public interacted with each piece.



When artist Gwen MacGegor began filling the wading pool at Stanely Park with buckets upon buckets of beautiful aqua-blue jello, people stood around and stared in awe. Some of the older kids asked questions: Why is she doing that? What is it for? Can we eat it? The sun shinning off the jagged pieces of jello was breathtaking, but it seemed unlikely that it would remain untouched all afternoon. Even I had an urge to run through it.

"Oh ya, it was a free for all," said Pearson when I asked her whether kids ended up playing in the jello later that day. "By the end it was more like a pool of goo." Apparently I missed the best part.

Over and Over and Over Again, a performance by Lisa Deanne Smith in Dufferin Grove Park, had children and toddlers running after 365 ping-pong balls, which the artist threw over her shoulder, one by one, from the centre of the pool.

In Jimmie Simpson Park, kids at a coincidental birthday party helped artist Julia Fiala confront her fear of water: Fiala covered her entire body in flotation devices before taking the plunge into the wading pool where she remained floating until the water was drained at the end of the day.

There are 112 wading pools open to the public throughout Toronto, but new pools haven't been built since the 70s. Some, like the one on Toronto Island, have been transformed into gardens, or splash pads, like the one in Regent Park. Sadly, it appears as though splash pads are the wave of the future. Constructed in the 80s and 90s, these play areas contain toys that spray water and require no lifeguard.

Pearson says *Wade* received a lot of positive feedback, and it's likely they will organize it again in the future. It was obvious that kids and their families enjoyed the event, but people passing by couldn't help but take notice either. For those who wouldn't normally give these puddles of water a second look, *Wade* no doubt forced them to ponder these community gathering places and the role they play in our communities.

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To learn more about Wade: www.teamproject.ca/wade.

For information on Toronto's wading pools:
www.toronto.ca/parks/recreation_facilities/swimming/index.htm.

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