

Charles Stankieveh: Distant Early Warnings

YUKON TERRITORY APR 2009



Charles Stankieveh *The DEW Project* 2009

Mention of the Distant Early Warning Line, or DEW Line, is bound to summon thoughts of Stanley Kubrick's classic Cold War—paranoia satire *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. After all, the joint US-Canadian military radar network—an icon of the mutual assured destruction era—was itself fully loaded with Cold War ironies. Aside from the extreme logistics of actually constructing DEW Line stations in the high arctic and the disputed politics of manning and maintaining (and now cleaning up) the sites, the entire system, originally developed to defend against Soviet bombers, was deemed obsolete even before it was fully operational.

But for cultural historians and artists, the DEW Line and its associated legacies still provide a fascinating study of not-so-distant anxieties. For *The DEW Project*, Dawson City-based artist Charles Stankieveh has developed a multimedia work that wryly taps into some of the myth and mystique of the Cold War relic. The “field installation” component of the project features a geodesic dome (the Buckminster Fuller reference here is not coincidental) resting on the frozen confluence of the Yukon and Klondike Rivers. It's a striking if remote sculptural installation, as a built-in LED system lights up the retro-modernist structure 24 hours a day with a shifting, aurora-like display of colour. But, citing the geodesic dome as “one of the first known architectures to introduce an international theatre of communication and networked warfare,” Stankieveh's construction also acts as a distant listening station, recording the river flow and shifting ice via submerged microphones, then transmitting those sounds for broadcast on a Dawson City radio station and over the Internet.



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The project also carries a rich archival element. In an early April performance in Dawson City fittingly titled *Gravity's Rainbow*, Stankieveh illuminated the history of the DEW Line and remote communications technologies across the north, with a contemporary tie-in—the recently reactivated international contentions over arctic sovereignty and homeland security. In a complementary online component, Stankieveh has coordinated with researcher David Neufeld to post the *BAR-1 DEW Line Archive*, an extensive database of photos, blueprints and other DEW Line ephemera. Finally, a limited edition project catalogue, complete with a vinyl recording of field installation recordings, is planned for later this year. In all, Stankieveh's signal is clear: It's okay to have a little fun at fear's expense.

- www.stankieveh.net



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