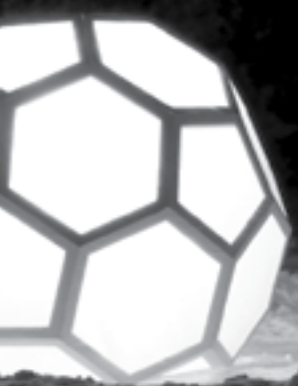




who's afraid  
of empty spaces?

Installation view of the *DEW Project* at night, atop the frozen confluence of the Klondike and Yukon Rivers, Yukon Territory, Canada, 64°03' N, 139°27' W.



# CHARLES STANKIEVECH

**resonating the intangible** BY LAURA PAOLINI

PHOTO BY CHARLES STANKIEVECH



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OME TIME AGO, A FRIEND AND I WERE TALKING outside a gallery, when suddenly we saw a bright green object sear through the night sky. Assuming it to be a stray firework, we waited for the expected explosion and crackles. We waited and waited, then waited some more. We finally stopped anticipating the sound and continued our conversation, but that moment left me feeling shortchanged. (What we saw that night was a stray meteorite—as subsequently reported on the news.) Later, I thought about sound and vision, and how they often occur not in that order nor in that combination. How often do our eyes deceive us and how often do we consider silence? Is silence a beginning, an ending, or is it even considered an event at all?

Charles Stankieveh has an acute understanding of how our imaginations work and how images and sounds resonate with us and yet remain intangible. Radio and sound in general, ephemeral as they are, resonate throughout his body of work. His oeuvre occupies the space between what you can't see and what you are told to see. And while his work dives into conceptual and political quagmires, it can be approached with playfulness, its humour achieved by shifting the frame of perception.

Stankieveh currently splits his time between Montreal and Dawson City, where he teaches at the Klondike Institute of Art and Culture, and where, on a piece of ice five-feet thick Stankieveh broke ground (or ice) on his *DEW Project*. The core of the *DEW Project* was an actual five-by-five-metre geodesic dome placed over the frozen confluence of the Yukon and Dawson Rivers, near Dawson City. Solar-powered and intentionally Fulleresque, the glowing geodesic dome relates to a direction taken in contemporary warfare: out of the trenches and onto the computer screen. While the solar-powered dome had a built-in LED system that illuminated it like the aurora borealis, it was primarily a recording station, with hydrophones sent down through the ice to collect the sounds of the rivers running through the Yukon. During the course of the installation, that soundscape could be heard through a

**TOP:** Installation view of the *DEW Project* in daylight. Solar panels in the foreground gather energy to power the installation; the antenna to the left of the dome broadcasts the sounds of the Klondike and Yukon Rivers via a low-wattage transmitter.

**LEFT:** Charles Stankieveh, making a *DEW Project* field recording on the Beaufort Sea, near Tuktoyuktuk, Northwest Territories, 69°26' N, 133°00' W.

**A BORDER IS NOT A CONNECTION BUT AN INTERVAL OF RESONANCE, AND SUCH GAPS ABOUND IN THE LAND OF THE DEW LINE.**

—MARSHALL MCLUHAN

**ON THE CD:** *Transmission* (mix from installation)

PHOTOS BY FLINT JAMISON AND CHARLES STANKIEVECH (BOTTOM), CHARLES STANKIEVECH (TOP)

live feed on the site, but was also broadcast live on Dawson City radio, streamed online, and subsequently archived online with the rest of the *DEW Project*.

The relative inaccessibility of this soundscape and the means of discovering it were the remarkable features of this project. One could do a pilgrimage to the recording station, to hear it live, but, as Stankieveh notes in an interview posted by goodcoldwater on <icecubicle.net>, “Most people experience *DEW* by listening online or in archival format. Listening on the ice was an experience reserved for those people who actually made the trek out of town to the site.”

The entire project was temporal. The *DEW Project* was solar powered, and after twenty-six days, with the arrival of spring, the ice on the rivers melted and cracked, something Stankieveh planned for. “There is something phenomenologically wonderful about standing on a sheet of ice with water rushing underneath you. I wanted people to be able to stand on site, listening with headphones to the ice shifting and water flowing right under their feet . . . it made the site temporary, its existence delineated by the melting of the river, thus connecting [the project] to the pressing issue of water ownership and global warming in the Arctic.”

As Stankieveh points out, “The *DEW Project* revisits the issue of boundaries—in regard to both the environment and sovereignty.” The work does so in part through its title, a nod to the DEW Line, a military communication system set up in the 1950s along the sixty-ninth parallel, from Alaska through northern Canada to Greenland and part of Iceland. The goal of the DEW Line, whose name is an acronym for Distant Early Warning, was to detect any Soviet bombers that might be approaching North America, doing so early enough to provide time to launch an effective defence. Radio communication was key. The radar-based detection system was completed in 1957, the same year the USSR became capable of space travel. When Sputnik 1 was launched in October 1957 it rendered the DEW defence strategy obsolete. DEW Line operations continued in some capacity, renamed several times, to serve other purposes, until the Line was deactivated in the mid 1990s. Commenting on the role of the DEW Line in sovereignty during an e-mail correspondence, Stankieveh noted that, “while the DEW Line was outdated at its birth, it continually morphed, defining a necessary buffer zone: what I call a no man’s / nomad’s land.” The Arctic has often been perceived from a frontierist perspective as a vast and barren site of isolation, yet one ripe with potential for conquest, as indicated by Russia’s 2007 planting of a flag on the floor of the Arctic Ocean.

Stankieveh’s *DEW Project* used radio and the Internet to deliver its message outside of the installation site: sounds of the rivers were broadcast on radio via low-wattage transmitter, and were also streamed online. Stankieveh’s use of radio relates not only to military technology but also to a social technology that would go on to shape not just the identity of the North but that of the rest of Canada. “The landscape of Canada,” says Stankieveh, “creates the scenario for telecommunications, a vital link [between] the communities and [a means for] creating the Nation State.”



Stankieveh, making a *DEW Project* recording of electromagnetic sound originating from a station of the North Warning System (part of the former DEW Line), Arctic Ocean, 69°26'N, 133°00'W.

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## TANKIEVECH'S 2008 WORK *HORROR VACUI*

has a peculiar way of penetrating the senses. Three glass bell-jars are arranged on foot-long, foot-deep wooden shelves, their bottoms lined with felt. Each bell-jar has a microphone inside and into each mike a different song is played and repeatedly re-recorded: “Sound and Vision” by David Bowie in one, “Good Vibrations” by the Beach Boys in another, and “Evenings” by the Velvet Underground in the third. Custom software manipulates the re-recording of the sounds so that eventually only the resonant frequencies remain. The sound from each bell-jar is cut to a one-of-a-kind, clear, 12" vinyl record, placed in a hand-sewn and embroidered felt sleeve and displayed with its respective bell-jar. When you really start listening, the piece becomes hauntingly familiar, its mantra-like qualities repeating pleasurably. The lyrics “Gotta keep those lovin’ good / Vibrations a-happenin’ with her” sound, and then, as they blur, certain parts of the composition become more apparent. Sharp pitches occur once or twice while the air is changing and settling, then they are routed back into the microphone and out again. This repeats until an almost single note remains—a vague presence where a defined sound had been: the ultimate good vibration.

The title *Horror Vacui* is taken from the Latin for “fear of empty spaces.” In the visual arts, the term denotes artworks completely filled by detail, and has come to be associated with Outsider Art and also, to some degree, with psychedelic art. More relevantly to the Stankieveh piece, though, *horror vacui* is also a much-debated philosophical and scientific theory about the existence of empty spaces, or rather, how things exist within empty spaces. In physics, *horror vacui*, or plenism, is the concept that a vacuum cannot exist because the empty space will find a way to fill itself. Funnily enough, debate about this concept also infiltrates the history of sonic art.

One key element of Stankieveh’s *Horror Vacui* is his interest in how space shapes sound. A viewer with a penchant for avant-garde composition will be reminded of Alvin Lucier’s *I Am Sitting in a Room*, in which the



TOP: Vacuum bell-jar, detail from *Horror Vacui*.

BOTTOM: Record and sleeve, detail from *Horror Vacui*.



**IF YOU CLOSE  
THE DOOR,  
THE NIGHT COULD  
LAST FOREVER.  
LEAVE THE SUNSHINE  
OUT, AND SAY HELLO  
TO NEVER.**  
— THE VELVET  
UNDERGROUND

resonance of a room gradually transforms a spoken text through reiterative recording. The text begins with the words “I am sitting in a room different from the one you are in now.” Lucier continues his account of what he is doing, and concludes with, “I regard this activity not so much as a demonstration of a physical fact, but more as a way to smooth out any irregularities my speech might have.” Slowly but surely, over the length of the composition, any semblance of actual speech is obliterated. Like much of Lucier’s work the piece examines the spatial qualities of sound. His methodology is quite plainly spelled out within the piece, a transparency reflected in some of the tendencies in Charles Stankievecch’s practice as well. But then, who’s afraid of empty spaces?

The bell-jars of *Horror Vacui* are reminiscent of the *DEW Project*’s geodesic dome. As a laboratory and, at the same time, an island on the river ice, the *DEW Project* offers us a moment of contemplation and of a distilled, modernist purity. Similarly, the bell-jar takes us to a theoretical moment denoted by the Greek word *epoché*, the point at which belief in the existence of the outside world is suspended. Stankievecch’s *epoché* is a bracketing process leading to a state of introspection. As the sound within the bell-jar is reduced to its resonant frequencies, his *epoché* also raises questions about silence and subjectivity.

Silence is generally thought of as a kind of lack of noise, but not a lack of motion. Perhaps the latter is a more apt description. Something happens between our ear and the air around it, marking silence as an event.

Thinking about silence as a physical event may also lead to a concept of silence as a transition. Stankievecch’s silence is not only about the event but about what makes a sound happen: a perception of sound as object. “With silence it is not necessarily a spiritual thing one might be after, as much as the notic[ing] of imperfections,” mused Stankievecch in a recent phone conversation. “These imperfections become interesting in themselves. You look at the materiality of a thing. If you believe in the Cagean idea, then this is silence; but amplified, [it’s] pure materiality: history, time, story of the object, and the means of production. Not exactly minimalism, not exactly Zen, not exactly mysticism . . . a strange celebration of materiality—as well as of the everyday.”

**C**ONSTELLATIONS, A 2008 INSTALLATION by Stankievecch, hovers in this celebratory space that he mentions. The work consists of several turntables set on the gallery floor, along with a number of subwoofers, plus 111 microspeakers suspended from the ceiling, causing the immediate space to become claustrophobic. Each turntable has a record on it, the needle settled on the record’s last groove, which transitions out and prompts you to turn to side B. This groove becomes a site of mediation between sound and no sound. Each record groove emits unique sounds caused by dust, fingerprints, or other debris. The physical artifact becomes magnified, and you realize that there is no silence at all. Through custom software the “silence” is magnified and returns to the ear

PHOTOS BY GUY L'HEUREUX / COURTESY CHARLES STANKIEVECCH AND THE DONALD BROWNE GALLERY

of the listener via the microspeakers dangling above and the subwoofers closer to the floor. The work is generally presented in the dark, so these details are less apparent than the ambient sounds.

A quote precedes Stankievecch's description of this work: "So it was by the stars you charted your course?" asked the Phoenicians. 'No,' said Menippus, 'it is among the stars themselves I travel.'" Menippus (third century BCE) is considered part of the Cynic school, and a humorist. The quote is taken from *Satirical Sketches* by the ancient Greek writer Lucian, who in some historical circles is considered one of the first science-fiction writers. Stankievecch notes that "this ancient quote shared an affinity with this shift in perception, and was fitting for a piece called *Constellations*, [which] sculpted a space around the listener with a hundred different speakers." While *Horror Vacui* illustrates how space shapes sound, *Constellations* creates a space shaped by sound.

*Constellations* cues the act of stargazing. This activity can be done by scientists and amateurs, fully showing how we ourselves are but one small mark in the universe, one small sound no louder than a murmur. This project does not become reductionist; quite the opposite. According to Stankievecch, it is meant to open up our perception so that we "become fascinated with the reality that is out there, or the reality that is created. And that project in itself is productive. The work is productive. That was a conscious shift in my work. To move from a critical framework into a constructive framework: productive and constructive, neither optimistic nor cynical—which I, as an artist, think is really important."

*Constellations* acts as a metaphorical envelope, as does the *DEW Project*. When we become engulfed in "silence," only to realize it is *not* silence, when we become enamoured by the noise made by thousands of tiny speakers, we find ourselves on the threshold of potential illumination. In theatre, this is sometimes called a "pregnant moment" before the action begins. Suddenly, sound and vision become capable of really leading us astray. While exploring ephemera from the past and juxtaposing the elements that make history and nostalgia, Stankievecch does not present a typical worldview, but rather creates his own small worlds, inviting viewers to question what they see, and more importantly, what they hear. He does all this while maintaining clear roles and responsibilities for each party involved: "One should always be an ethical person, but not necessarily an ethical artist. I don't think the role of an artist is ethical; that re-enforces preconceived notions . . . [the artist] needs to open up culture into a new light. The light isn't always comforting."

*Laura Paolini is a performance and media artist based in Toronto. Her work and columns have appeared nationally and internationally in such publications as Fuse Magazine, <H>ART International, and Les Fleurs Du Mal. Paolini is currently the internships and projects coordinator at Vtape, and the secretary on the board of governors for Fado Performance Art Inc. Her next curatorial endeavour will explore early image-manipulated video art for a program co-presented by Vtape and Trinity Square Video.*



TOP: Turntables in the installation *Constellations* (2008) at the Darling Foundry, Montreal.

BOTTOM: Installation view of *Constellations* (lights artificially on). Custom software is used to route, process, and modulate record loops into a field of textures distributed to the speaker array overhead and through the gallery floor via subwoofers.

**‘SO IT WAS  
BY THE STARS  
YOU CHARTED YOUR  
COURSE?’ ASKED THE  
PHOENICIANS.  
‘NO,’ SAID MENIPPUS,  
‘IT IS AMONG THE  
STARS THEMSELVES  
I TRAVEL.’**  
—LUCIAN’S SATIRICAL  
SKETCHES

FYI: For more coverage of sound installation, check out Micheline Roi's article "Sculpting Space: The Organic Installations of Robin Minard" in *Musicworks 102*.

LINKS:

[www.stankievecch.net](http://www.stankievecch.net)