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Interview: Charles Stankieveh



Last winter, Charles Stankieveh installed The DEW Project at the confluence of the Klondike and Yukon rivers, just outside Dawson City in Canada's Yukon.

Stankieveh is a multimedia artist interested in the overlaps between visual art, architecture and acoustics, especially when architecture and sound are part of communications technologies. Stankieveh has been an instructor at the [KIAC School of Visual Arts \(SOVA\)](#) in Dawson City since it opened in 2007.

The DEW Project was housed in a remote transmission station – a plastic and wood geodesic radome. The project included:

- Headphones attached to a hydrophone inserted through a hole in the ice, allowing people to listen to live recordings of water moving beneath the ice;
- An internet audio stream that mixed the river's sounds with pre-recorded audio from the BAR-3 DEW station. The audio could also be heard live on the local radio station, and can still be enjoyed on Stankieveh's [website](#);
- A video from from the BAR-3 DEW station close to Tuktoyuktuk on the Arctic Ocean – formerly a USAF DEW Line station BAR-3 and today still operational under the North Warning System.

Stankieveh's DEW Project references the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, which was built from 1954–56 as a joint venture between the Royal Canadian Air Force and the US Air Force. It was there for defence reasons – the string of radar sites would detect any airborne invasion – but also for ideological reasons, functioning as a reminder that Arctic sovereignty was not a simple, settled affair. Internationally, we are revisiting similar questions again.

Curious about this connection between centuries, ideologies and sounds, I asked Stankieveh a few questions.

Meg Walker: Your art has combined audio and sculpture for several years now, but as I understand it The DEW Project was a leap forward for you in terms of making a large outdoor work that needed to meet serious temperature and weather challenges. Why did you want to present this work in the winter?

Charles Stankieveh: While not the largest installation I've built, I would definitely say this was the most ambitious project. This is because it required a number of functioning systems: solar power, radio transmission, computer controlled lighting, structural design, heating and insulation, underwater sound recording, and internet streaming. As you know from living in the Yukon, the temperature and limited lighting conditions exponentially increases the difficulty of making the most ordinary things work: like a toilet or my bicycle.

It would have been significantly easier to build and exhibit this project in the summer, but I would not have been able to place it in the middle of the Yukon and Klondike rivers and thus on the ice which was something I was recording. I also needed the darkness so I could back light the translucent geodesic dome to have a glowing rainbow orb in the middle of this expansive white "gallery" space of the frozen Yukon River.

MW: About that location. How did you form the decision to place your scaled-down version of Buckminster Fuller's Geodesic Radome on the frozen Yukon River, rather than on a nearby piece of frozen land?

CS: There were several reasons. First, the Yukon River is an international waterway because it flows into the ocean and is under a different jurisdiction than the rest of the surrounding area. It was important that the project was located in this territory of a fluid boundary.

Second, the project is very close to Tr'ochëk, the traditional fishing area of the First Nations people of the Klondike. I wanted to keep a respectful distance. While The DEW Project looks at military colonialisation in the Arctic, I did not want to repeat a Gold Rush atrocity again in a contemporary context. To have placed my project on the land at the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike rivers I felt ventured into this area.

Third, 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 onsite listening with headphones to the ice shifting and water flowing right under their feet. 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.

Fourth, it made the site temporary, its existence delineated by the melting of the river, and thus connecting to the pressing issue of water ownership and global warming in the arctic. I should note here, this is an issue I've been interested in since a 2006 piece I built in a sinking Venice where I constructed a floating island out of discarded tourist water bottles in the footprint of Robert Smithson's Island of Broken Glass. Islands, water and site-specificity are ideas I picked up from Smithson early in my career and still continue to surface in my work from time to time.

MW: Tell me about the geodesic dome. When did you first learn about this architectural form, and how did it become a form in your own creative work?

CS: I can distinctly recall as a child Expo 86 in Vancouver and Disney's EPCOT in Orlando while still in the single digits. The geodesic dome has always been a very nostalgic design for someone my age. I visited the Expo 67 dome built by Bucky often while living in Montreal as an adult.

But as elegant of a design as the geodesic is, I never considered using it for my own work because it was such a strong sign for a certain ethos of the 20th Century. My original pavilion designs for The DEW Project were much more "contemporary." I considered faceted crystal forms (popular at such avant garde schools like the Architecture Association in London where I spent some time during the design phase), or more organic forms built with complex curves. I resisted using the geodesic form for a long time-right up until the cultural importance of the design became a significant factor in the overall meaning of the project and I couldn't ignore it any longer.

While the geodesic dome has become passé or kitsch in design trends, the basic concept of structural tessellation appears in many designs using parametric or algorithmic strategies. I think we have Bucky to thank for this, if not for the engineering propaganda, at least for its popular acceptance.

MW: Your research for The DEW Project took you to several remote locations in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. Did you venture into Alaska or any other circumpolar nations?

CS: The DEW project's initial field research started during one of my many solo snowshoe hikes in the Tombstone Mountains, where a string of microwave towers and antennae connect Inuvik to the Whitehorse. The first recordings and videos I shot for The DEW project were of these strange manmade structures standing alone in a vast wilderness connecting small communities across a sublime landscape. They also became interesting markers of territory that ended up being goals for me instead of the traditional summit climb or mountain lake.

Last January I made a trip up the Dempster Highway and the Mackenzie Delta Ice Road to Tuktoyuktuk, NWT on the Beaufort Sea. I arranged this trip to the Arctic Ocean because it once was the site of the BAR-3 USAF DEW Line station and today still operational under the North Warning System. Driving on a road made out of ice on the Mackenzie River is one of the most beautiful road trips I've ever undertaken: seeing the land slip away into a flat icescape with the occasional pingo backlit by a pink light.

In other regions, in the last year I spent an uneventful night in Iceland and a trip to HAARP, Gakona, Alaska to make some recordings of a less historical military installation. HAARP [High-Frequency Active Auroral Research Program] is another US Air Force project, though unlike the DEW Line it is a research facility experimenting with the Ionosphere for a plethora of reasons, some benign and others, some argue, not so benign-but this is not the place to delve into that discussion.

Image: HAARP, from the Ghost Rockets Tour

MW: Sound is an experientially important part of The DEW Project for viewers. If you had to describe the sound of river-carried ice to a deaf person, how would you describe it?

CS: While standing on the ice I would say this: imagine if the cracking and crushing of your bones was a pleasurable feeling.

I had the rare and fortunate experience last spring of actually seeing and hearing the Yukon River break in person while on the river shore. I just happened to be on a bike ride at 2am in the morning along the river when it started to shift and break up. I obviously was not on the ice, but standing on the shore, in this circumstance it sounded like distant thunder.

MW: Even though John Cage and other twentieth-century musicians and artists expanded our cultural understanding that any noise can be worth listening to if we adjust our attention, this idea still seems able to surprise and delight us. I'm curious about your relationship with sound - especially with sounds that most people usually consider "white noise" or "non-sound" or even static that should be tuned out. Are your aural choices part of a project to protect our collective acoustic ecology? Or do you just prefer washes of noise over percussive ones, when it comes to your artistic sound palette?

CS: I don't typically prefer one type of sound over another, though I definitely prefer some arrangements of sounds over others, and even more importantly the time and spatial location of sounds. While I was R. Murray Schafer's TA in grad school (the inventor of the discipline of acoustic ecology), I learned that we definitely differ in our appreciation of industrial noise. I think what he necessarily brought to our attention was the importance of sound design; but as in all design, there is more than one way to build a mousetrap. I respect his ethical concerns, but aesthetics is something else.

Yes, my work possesses a propensity for washes of noise - whether white or perhaps shifting tones of colour. For me, this sonic texture can offer an intense beauty, but I don't think I'm in the minority in appreciating noise. While noise theory easily latches onto John Cage's radical openness to new sounds, this type of enjoyment for me comes more directly from Jimi Hendrix and other distorted guitars listened to in my youth. Still today I listen to as much psychedelic rock as electro-acoustic music, and some of the best composers use different combinations of guitars, distortion pedals, crackle boxes, laptops and other paraphernalia (Fennesz, Tim Hecker, Lee Ranaldo, et al.). It's really not about choosing one sound over another: noise over noise, electromagnetic over acoustic, waves over beats (I used to mix minimal techno, but

then again maybe I just realised I can't keep rhythm).

MW: There's also a deeply political component to The DEW Project. In your written introduction to the work, you look to the future as well as to the past when you mention that the same countries involved in the DEW (Canada, Russia, US, and Denmark) are "again turning their attention towards the North, but "driven this time by what could be called the 'Warm War.'" Can you talk a little more about this?

CS: During the Cold War we didn't really fight. It was a time in history when war was a Public Relations game. Military zones were built up, armament tests and experiments were conducted, Treaties were signed or not signed, and then not honored; colonisation occurred to protect assets; and other aggressive actions tried to fight an ideological war without direct confrontation.

Today a lot of the same actions are occurring, with the major addition of scientific claims being made. But Canada's Arctic sovereignty is just as threatened today as it was during the Cold War. It is open knowledge we cannot patrol the waters we supposedly call "Internal," and that Arctic oceanic territory is very much open for dispute, particularly by the US. Nor do we even have the satellite infrastructure to remotely monitor our arctic waterways.

In my opinion there are four main reasons to control the Arctic:

1. Nomad's Zone, or The Northwest Passage (the initial interest in the arctic was to find a trade route to India, once a rejected route now opening up as a possibility again);
2. No Man's Zone (for military protection and testing as in the Cold War.);
3. Oil Reserves (from 1960s on mainly including today and the future); and
4. Preservation of Ecological Balance (an international concern as the poles' states seem to affect the entire globe's biosphere).

Because the "Warm War" is less a direct ideological war and more a natural resources war, it will be interesting to see how much the sides can keep themselves at bay. With an energy and economic crisis, however, these previously considered "no man's" lands (what I call "nomad's" lands) will be zones as worth militaristic intervention as the Middle East.

Yet the precariousness of this zone is equivalent to the Cold War nuclear holocaust. Irreversible damage to the ecosystem is not as quick as a nuclear explosion, but definitely just as long lasting and serious. In other words, an unfortunate environmental scenario is less of a spectacle as a blinding mushroom cloud, but should have the same global concern. It's the issue of time here that is the big difference: atomic time vs. geological time.

MW: Thanks Charles. And I have one more question about sound, before you go. Your website mentions a "Publication with 7" record scheduled for release in Fall 2009." Is this released by now? Would you consider creating a cast-ice version the vinyl record that could be played in Dawson for those of us who could not see The DEW Project in person?

CS: The record is still in production, but I hope for it to be released for the exhibition [Magnetic Norths](#), which I'm curating for the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery in Montreal come Feb 2010. A five-minute soundtrack extract from the video Transmission (shown as part of The DEW Project) is being released in the upcoming Musicworks (issue. 106) around the same time. Presently, I'm trying to work with some musicians to create remixes of the source material in addition to the record so the process has been extended.

I'd love to make an ice record. However, it was done already in the 1990s by an ice cream vender who had a fetish for vinyl records in Austria. He played the record as it melted. I think I recall the song being about lost love and produced this rather melancholic experience while listening to it melt away. Art can't really top an enthusiast who creates something like that. It's perfect.

This interview is an expanded and updated version of an earlier interview published on The Ice Cubicle.