Margaret Dragu & Freya Björg Olafson
Collaborative residency & performance
October 7–29

Andrea Williamson: The Open Crowd
Drawn Together curated by Mary Ann Dobson
September 23–October 29

Maria Whiteman
Karen Zalamea: WORK WORK WORK
November 4–December 1

The Fine Art of Schmoozy
Annual winter fundraising gala—November 3

Artist-in-residence David Janzen: Pile Driver
Stacey Cann: Personal Matter
October 13–November 12

Main Gallery call for submissions
Deadline November 30th
Visit harcourthouse.ab.ca for details

Spring Art Courses
Registration begins January 2012

Image: David Janzen
This text introduces the work of Canadian artist Charles Stankievech with a focus on his projects in the Arctic. Composed as a field of aphoristic fragments the text is intended to illustrate Charles’ own writing and my reflections and responses to his work. Organized in 34 points, the text refers both to the strategies of early conceptual art and to the individual stations composing the Cold War era DEW Line (a series of radar stations traversing the Arctic from Alaska to Greenland). The text can be read from any point, as a linear structure or as an open form document. Conclusions derived from this material are left for the reader to determine.
The interpenetration of forms, fields, facts, and fictions lies somewhere central to the practice of Charles Stankievech. Between architecture, conceptual art, popular culture, military technology and communication networks we find the bulk of the Canadian artist’s work. What must be emphasized is that while his practice may encounter many themes, Stankievech’s most enduring trait is not necessarily a singularity of vision, but an ability to see the complex interconnectedness of different cultural signs, and to move seamlessly between the roles of artist, researcher, teacher, and academic. His methodology is one of adaptation, of linking the disparate, and de-familiarizing the similar. This approach yields revelatory assemblages of the past, present and possible future. At the same time he remains fixated on certain positions to which his work repeatedly returns. Particularly notable is his deep interest in the Canadian Arctic. This place, at the limits of endurance and experience draws Stankievech again and again.

**Fieldwork**

“A fieldwork engages with the geographic site but then warps one’s perception of the space comparable to a mathematical ‘strange attractor’. Sharing, on one hand, the history of art installation (which can modulate the encompassing architecture and the viewer’s phenomenological perception) and on the other hand, the history of ‘site-specific’ or earthwork art (which amplifies the place’s story or materiality), a fieldwork creates its own temporary architecture within a space or in a landscape. However, such a landscape need not be natural and the architecture may not always be a traditional shelter or sculpture, but can be composed of sonic material, electromagnetic fields, light fluctuations, or relationships. At its core, a fieldwork is dynamic and geospatial.”

— Extracted from Charles Stankievech’s text for the exhibition “Magnetic Norths” at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, Montréal (2010).

In a recent poll conducted by Ekos Research for the Munk School in Toronto and reported by the Globe & Mail (“Canadians Rank Arctic Sovereignty Top Foreign-Policy Priority,” January 24, 2011) it was found that Canadians see the Arctic as “a cornerstone of Canada’s national identity” and that “there is a high degree of consensus among Canadians on the symbolic and public-policy significance of the Arctic.”

It turns out Stankievech and I come from the same province, same city and same community. We never knew each other until meeting in Dawson City in 2009, but we were practically neighbours in our youth. In that sense I can imagine some of his formative years. Various tinkering experiments and inventions in the garage, a fascination with liminal experiences and remote places fuelled by inter-stellar imaginings, even the compulsion for Kafka—all are close to home. When he says in an interview with Sophie Springer that “I was fortunate enough to apply to a wide variety of wholes considered from heterogeneous parts. Entities ranging from atoms and molecules to biological organisms, species and ecosystems may be usefully treated as assemblages and therefore as entities that are products of historical processes. This implies, of course, that one uses the term ‘historical’ to include cosmological and evolutionary history, not only human history.”


The school in Dawson is one of Stankievech’s success stories. Along with a core of other committed educators he founded the program, surely one of the most unique art schools in Canada. The Yukon School of Visual Art (SOVA) gives students the first year of an arts degree which can be completed at one of several partnering institutions “down south” – such as NSCAD, OCAD, ECIAD and ACAD. Besides preparing students with a technically and conceptually rigorous first year, Stankievech also organizes an annual exhibition for the class that is made in collaboration with an invited artist. Called *Over the Wire* these projects have included heavyweights such as Shary Boyle, Gary Hill, SIMPARC, and Lawrence Weiner. The invited artists provide a series of instructions to Stankievech’s students, and through these instructions the students produce an exhibition in Dawson. The idea of communication over distance that the project exemplifies also sits comfortably within Stankievech’s larger oeuvre. There is a similar tendency with *Over the Wire* that we can easily identify in both the DEW Project and *Ghost Rockets World Tour.*

“A theory of assemblages, and of the processes that create and stabilize their historical identity, was created by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze in the last decades of the twentieth century. This theory was meant to apply to a wide variety of wholes constructed from heterogeneous parts. Entities ranging from atoms and molecules to biological organisms, species and ecosystems may be usefully treated as assemblages and therefore as entities that are products of historical processes. This implies, of course, that one uses the term ‘historical’ to include cosmological and evolutionary history, not only human history.”


The day Charles left for Florida I went up the Dempster Highway with Corinn Gerber. Charles left us his truck to go up there. It was a clear day and we wanted to see the Tombstones. Not a graveyard, but an eerie remote range of mountains, the Tombstones loom over the Dempster Highway, forming a gateway to the tundra. If you want to drive to Inuvik you go through this place. While we were in those high snowy passes we noticed a strange rectangular shape mounted precipitously on the hills. Was it a drive-in movie screen, a collector dish for invisible waves, or a transmitter of some kind? There was something unnerving about that big dark rectangle up on the rocky outcrop. I couldn’t help but think about the monolith in 2001: *A Space Odyssey.*

— Stan Rogers, *Northwest Passage*

“Russia symbolically staked its claim to billions of dollars worth of oil and gas reserves in the Arctic Ocean today when two mini submarines reached the seabed more than two and a half miles beneath the North Pole. In a record-breaking dive, the two craft planted a one metre-high titanium Russian flag on the underwater Lomonosov ridge, which Moscow claims is directly connected to its continental shelf. However, the dangerous mission prompted ridicule and scepticism among other contenders for the Arctic’s energy wealth, with Canada comparing it to a 15th century colonial land grab.”

— “Russia Plants Flag on North Pole Seabed,” the Guardian, August 2, 2007

![The DEW Project, Electromagnetic Recording, North Warning System, Arctic Ocean. credit: F. Jamison + C. Stankievech, courtesy of the artist.](Image 42 to 47)

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It was a warm night in Dawson and the sun was getting orange and low around 11pm. Although I’d never been there before it felt unseasonable. The weather was changing, and faster than I expected it to. Earlier in the day, almost as soon as I arrived, the ice on the Yukon River broke. Everything was quiet, then sometime around noon a siren rang throughout the town. That droning ring signified that a massive jumble of frozen choss had just rushed off downstream, revealing the fast, frigid water underneath. I could’ve sworn it was an air raid. Only a few weeks earlier, Charles Stankievech’s installation *The DEW Project* had been located near that very spot where the ice cracked.

“The DEW Line was not a wall like they had in Berlin; it was never intended to repel or annex. To state things more correctly, it was meant to selectively repel, like a semi-permeable membrane. Built between 1954 and 1957, as a Cold War defense project between the United States and Canada, the Line consisted of thirty-four remote outposts situated close to the 69th parallel. Each station transmitted a perpetual and unbroken radar wave across the Arctic Ocean. If the Russians came over the pole the DEW was the first perimeter for raising the alarm. The unavoidable signals from the stations bounced off every plane in range, be it long-range bomber or local prop. If the signal came, if that scenario played out, the DEW would allow a few extra minutes for city dwellers to escape before the bombs dropped. Simultaneously, that Distant Early Warning would allow the Americans to launch their own nukes, thus assuring mutual destruction. Of course, from a different perspective the line was primarily a tactical deterrent. The DEW was a fully functional state-of-the-art bluff that used the North as a no-man’s-land. The Arctic was the gambit between the trenches.”

Stretching from Greenland to Alaska, the DEW Line populated the boundary it defined with Geodesic Radomes courtesy of Buckminster Fuller. So, before they became symbols for utopian travellers on Spaceship Earth, these structures were the emblems of northern military presence. The dome design has now been repurposed once again, as part of Charles Stankievech’s work. He speaks of them as “the synecdoche of post-WWII warfare – an architecture that distributes its structural forces through a framework formally related to the communication network connecting the architecture.” These buildings are the physical signifier for the tactical wireless network, the sine qua non of an emergent global telecommunication system.

*The DEW Project* consists of numerous inter-related components that include site-specific and gallery installations, radio broadcasts, live performances, videos, lectures, publications, and web components. The physical focal point of the project is a human-scale Geodesic structure that was located on the winter ice at the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike Rivers. Individuals could enter into this Geodesic and listen to the sound of the river and ice below as it was transmitted by hydrophone to headphone. The real-time hydrophonics were also relayed by a solar powered radio transmitter; to be listened to locally in Dawson at 100.1 FM, and through internet streaming to a worldwide audience.

Additionally, Stankievech accompanied the project with a web presence that included documentation of the project and an updated platform for the BAR-1 Archive. This archive was produced by historian David Neufeld in 1996, and includes photographs, blueprints, videos and other material related to the Herschel Island DEW Line station on the Beaufort Sea.

When exhibited *The DEW Project* is differently contextualized, with the Geodesic listening station forming the hub of a sculptural installation that plays archived recordings from the original broadcasts and is accompanied by videos taken at various DEW stations. The work changes from a singular phenomenological experience of site, to become a document. The sculpture and the sound form a time capsule, a transmission from the Klondike to the rest of the world.

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"Don’t fight forces, use them.”
— R. Buckminster Fuller

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I know it makes no difference
To what you’re going through
But I see the tip of the iceberg
And I worry about you
— Rush, *Distant Early Warning*
Since the DEW Line was so much about radar signals, one might ask how Stankievech’s DEW Project came to record the sounds of melting ice and the current of the Yukon River. After all, the DEW Line was not so much related to the flows of liquid resources, as it was to the transmission of invisible airwaves. But on closer inspection The DEW Project is not only involved with examining the historical significance of Cold War defence in the Arctic, the project also speculates on what the impacts of global warming might produce in the near future. Stankievech refers to these coming events as a “Warm War.” According to this scenario, as the Arctic pack ice begins to thaw, areas around the North Pole and the Northwest Passage will become increasingly accessible for shipping and resource extraction. In this sense, melting ice and flowing water might be seen as the most potent symbols representing the future Arctic.

If The DEW Project was concerned with exploring defensive network systems in the North, Stankievech’s Ghost Rockets World Tour can be understood as the other side of its coin. In that sense Ghost Rockets is involved primarily with examining the offensive military systems of the Cold War. For the project Stankievech travelled to important sites related to the history of ballistic missile technology. Moving from Cape Canaveral, to Teufelberg, to Edwards Air Force Base, to M.I.T., to multiple Arctic locations, he orchestrated twelve distinct launches that commemorated and complicated the histories of these sites. At each location a small model rocket was sent skyward, ignited to the accompaniment of a soundtrack, and the haze of military issue purple smoke grenades. A video from each launch was recorded to document the scenes, and ephemera such as Zippo’s, foil blankets, and crystals were collected, forming what Stankievech refers to as “talisman.” The entire project is a global and local spectacle, cruising from location to location the way missiles might carve through the atmosphere from launch to target. Alternatively, we might see this project as a rock n’ roll world tour, performing at different arenas of engagement throughout the Northern Hemisphere.

I’m looking through a hole in the sky
I’m seeing nowhere through the eyes of a lie
I’m getting closer to the end of the line
I’m living easy where the sun doesn’t shine

— Black Sabbath, Hole in the Sky

That is the whole idea of the machine, you know. Deterrence is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy... the FEAR to attack. And so, because of the automated and irrevocable decision-making process which rules out human meddling, the Doomsday machine is terrifying and simple to understand...

— Dr. Strangelove, from Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964)

But to think that Ghost Rockets simply glorifies militarism would be incorrect. In its very form, there is a level of discom- fort in the work. This discomfort is produced at the intersection between satire and fascination. At once this network of networks in the North, Stankievech’s intent to reveal and evaluate a technology that is vitally important in our lives today. Simultaneously, the modesty and ephemeral quality of the endeavour and the tongue-in-cheek theatricality of the smoke bombs and soundtracks undermine a sense of fetish chauvinism. A guerrilla sensibility is engaged for certain of the launches as well, lending the project an air of rebellious subterfuge.

“Our knowledge and use of the laws of nature that enable us to fly to the Moon also enable us to destroy our home planet with the atom bomb. Science itself does not address the question whether we should use the power at our disposal for good or for evil.”

— Wernher Von Braun

Purple haze all in my eyes
Don’t know if it’s day or night
You’ve got me blown, blown my mind
Is it tomorrow or just the end of time?

— Jimi Hendrix, Purple Haze

Jules Olitski was a significant, if sometimes maligned modernist painter. His career was characterized by a meteoric rise and fall, achieving its apogee in the mid to late 60s when he was highly touted by Clement Greenberg and represented the United States at the Venice Biennale. During this time Olitski was considered to be one of the most exemplary members of the Colour Field movement. His most acknowledged innovation was the use of pressurised sprayed paint, which removed all trace of the artist’s hand, leaving the pure colour of the paint to rest on the canvas, with little allusion to depth or figuration. Olitski once commented that he wanted his paintings to look like, “nothing but some colors sprayed into the air and staying there.”

“One aerosol can of enamel sprayed to conclusion directly upon the floor.”

— Lawrence Weiner

Am I witnessing an appearance or a disappearance? The more I see of this big canvas the more I am overwhelmed by it. It’s static, but it feels enveloping, ethereal, comforting, but unnerving. Where are my feet? Am I falling or flying? Maybe that’s the arctic too? The whiteout? The painting is over six metres in length, so it’s big enough to hold a large room with its massive and evaporating form. Lucy Lippard would have referred to this work as “Muzak” back in the 60s. It’s interesting that she didn’t see some trace of the Arctic sky in the picture, after her travels there with Lawrence Weiner, Harry Savage, Virgil Hammock, and N.E. Thing Company. Maybe it just took time to notice the suggestion of an immeasurable space within this supposedly “atomized” flatness. Perhaps the painting has more in common with The Sea of Ice / The Wreck of Hope than its pure colour would lead us to believe.

Upon viewing this work (Instant Landscape, 1966), by Jules Olitski Stankievech was immediately captivated by it. When he visited an area near Inuvik, as part of his Ghost Rockets World Tour the connection between the Arctic vista and Olitski’s painting aligned, albeit through spewing clouds from smoke grenades. Stankievech captured a video of the purple smoke rising in the Arctic sky, and took it back to Dawson to consider. He began to research Olitski’s painting, connecting the artist to Lippard, and her polar excursions just after she wrote Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object. At a later time, Stankievech was introduced to the science-fiction book The Purple Cloud by the British author M.P Shiel. Written in 1901, the novel documents the life of an explorer who is the only member of his exhibition to survive a trip to the North Pole. Upon completion of his successful trip he returns to warmer climates only to discover that the entire population of the Earth has been wiped out by a mysterious violet vapour.
Combining all of these references is Stankievech’s latest gallery installation titled “Loveland.” The work presents Stankievech’s video at the same scale as Olitski’s painting with a deep immersive soundtrack composed by Tim Hecker. The viewing site for the video is a specifically constructed white room that references the Arctic landscape and the white cube. In a separate chamber, adjoining the video space is found a copy of The Purple Cloud presented within a display case embedded in the wall. The book is housed in a hexagonal mirrored box sealed by a sheet of dichroic glass. Opposite the book vitrine is another similar container housing emerald crystals illuminated by UV light.

“The lake, I fancy, must be a mile across, and in its middle is a pillar of ice, very low and broad; and I had the clear impression, or dream, or notion, that there was a name, or word, graven all round in the ice of the pillar in characters which I could never read; and under the name a long date; and the fluid of the lake seemed to me to be wheeling with a shivering ecstasy, splashing and fluttering, round the pillar; always from west to east, in the direction of the spinning of the earth…”

— M.P. Shiel, The Purple Cloud, 1901

“What makes it so impressive, and so uninteresting to describe, is the space, and the infinite sameness of the terrain, the very subtle color range illuminated by a sharp, even light which has a terrible clarity. We arrive at 6:30 p.m. into the eerie red glow of a curiously diffused sunset edged by dense blue skies.”


Charles Stankievich / stankievech.net