

Charles Stankievec's
*The Soniferous Æther
of the Land Beyond the
Land Beyond*

—
by Carmen Victor

A WORLD WITHOUT

US



Previous spreads
 Charles Stankievecch
 Film stills from *The Soniferous Æther of the Land Beyond the Land Beyond*
 2013
 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE
 MONTREAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS,
 PURCHASE, THE MUSEUM CAMPAIGN
 1988-93 FUND

Located on the northeastern tip of Ellesmere Island in the Qikiqtaaluk region of Nunavut, 817 kilometres from the geographic North Pole, Canadian Forces Station (CFS) Alert is the northernmost permanent settlement on Earth. Originally founded as a weather station in 1950, it became a signals intelligence facility in 1957–58 because of its strategic position in relation to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Significantly south of CFS Alert, the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, a chain of radar communication stations designed to detect a nuclear attack by the Soviet Union across the North Pole, extends across the North.

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

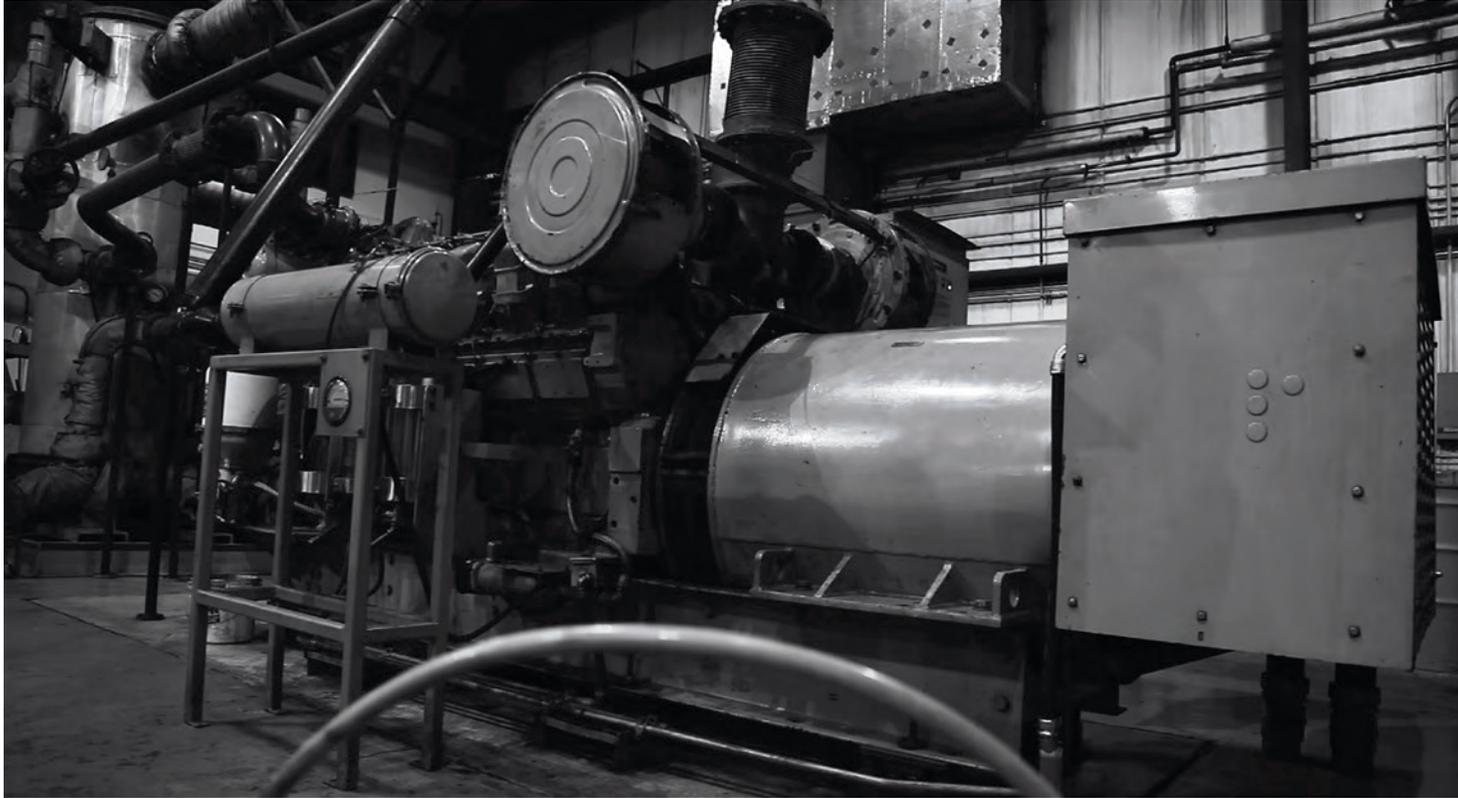
It is generally believed that the DEW Line system was rendered obsolete with the advent of intercontinental ballistic missiles, but the system was upgraded with more powerful sensors that could be operated remotely, allowing it to function like the surveillance technology at CFS Alert. Today, CFS Alert remains active as a surveillance outpost, although the military personnel stationed at the base have been reduced because the data collected there is sent elsewhere for analysis.

Marshall McLuhan's oft-quoted metaphor—"I think of art, at its most significant, as a DEW line, a Distant Early Warning system that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it"¹—came to define the role of the artist during times of social and technological upheaval. *The Soniferous Æther of the Land Beyond the Land Beyond* (2013) by Canadian artist Charles Stankievecch can be seen as one such instance of the prophetic capacity of art. As part of the Canadian Forces Artists Program (CFAP), Stankievecch was invited to become an artist-in-residence at CFS Alert, the result of which was a film installation composed of haunting black-and-white images of this remote settlement during the twenty-four-hour Arctic winter darkness.

These images were taken using a combination of long-exposure and time-lapse photography, which was subsequently digitally recorded and transferred to 35mm motion-picture film. During the film's ten-minute duration, the images unfold from the dark sky and barren landscape to the interior of the military surveillance outpost, cycling again to exterior shots of the wreckage of an airplane before settling on a long shot of shafts of light emanating from the site into the night sky.

The film is presented in a large gallery wherein the environment is completely white and the only source of light is the projection itself. Prior to entering the gallery, the viewer passes through an antechamber which houses an array of objects and artifacts, including two clocks, a vinyl record, photographs, postcards and other printed matter. Resembling the clocks featured in the images of the interior of CFS Alert, those mounted in the antechamber are labelled AC and DC, the one being electric and the other battery-powered. Operating with different power sources, they gradually fall out of sync. The vinyl record is Glenn Gould's recording of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, which was utilized in the film's soundtrack. The postcards, which were mailed by the artist from CFS Alert to a host of destinations, feature redacted messages. Additional printed matter includes a selection of items acquired by the artist en route to and at the site, including a military luggage tag, an IBM computer punch card and a bowling score sheet. Lastly, *Anbarium* (2015), an artist's book featuring a titanium cover and accompanied by a rare-earth element, completes the work.

The official motto of CFS Alert is *Inuit Nunangata Ungata*, an Inuktitut phrase that roughly translates to "the land beyond the land of the people." Stankievecch's seemingly esoteric title combines the official motto with an excerpt from Thomas Pynchon's postmodern novel *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), in which an invisible medium permeates space, the so-called "soniferous æther." Pynchon's soniferous æther, in turn, refers to an arcane substance identified as "luminiferous æther." At one time, it was generally held that this apocryphal, luminiferous æther propagated light



Charles Stankievec
Film stills from *The Soniferous
Ether of the Land Beyond the Land
Beyond*
2013
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE
MONTREAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS,
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Left
Installation view of *Anbarium: A Transplanetary Comparative History of Metallurgical Exchange* (2015) by Charles Stankieveh. Artist's book with rare-earth element in glass ampule. Photo: Jens Ziehe/Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (Vienna)
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THYSSEN-BORNEMISZA ART CONTEMPORARY (VIENNA)

Opposite
Meteorite Excavated, 1896/Meteorite Buried, 2011 (2011) by Charles Stankieveh. Documentation of the performance, artifact. Photo: Charles Stankieveh
COURTESY CHARLES STANKIEVECH

² Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (London: Vintage Books, 2013): 824.

³ "Into the Aether with Charles Stankieveh: The Artist Interviewed by Reilley Bishop-Stall and Natalie Zayne Bussey," May 11, 2013, <http://passengerart.com/2013/05/11/into-the-aether-and-beyond-a-passenger-art-interview-with-charles-stankieveh>. Accessed July 10, 2015.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York and London: Routledge Classics, 2006): 7.

⁵ "Into the Aether with Charles Stankieveh."

throughout the universe, but Einstein's theory of relativity supplanted this notion. Because sound waves require a medium such as air or water through which to be transmitted, sound cannot exist in outer space. Pynchon, however, suggests that his readers regard this fact as an "elaborate scientific lie."² Rather, he proposes the existence of something he calls the soniferous æther, a substance that would allow sound to travel in an airless environment. By incorporating Pynchon's phrase in his title, Stankieveh suggests that the environment depicted in his film is itself airless, possibly a post-apocalyptic world with no atmosphere, or, perhaps, the surface of the moon or outer space. Furthermore, he refers not only to "the land beyond the land of the people," but to *the land beyond* that land, signifying nowhere or nothingness.

Because it is so far north, the circumpolar region experiences what is known as polar night. Annually, there are more than three consecutive months of continuous, twenty-four-hour darkness. Uninterrupted darkness inevitably alters one's sense of time. As Stankieveh has commented:

The movement of the stars creates a pivotal sense of time in the work. If you watch the [piece] closely, ... the stars are all moving [in] the same direction, creating their own rotational movement, which ... echoes the looping structure of the film.... For me, *The Soniferous Æther* is "the zone" between the static and the changing, like a needle stuck in a record groove.... Shall we say *The Soniferous Æther* generates post-apocalyptic time? Not classical circular time, not linear Christian eschatological time, something beyond both, a dialectic of the two where time feels out of joint after a singular rupture.³

In conditions of perpetual darkness in which time feels "out of joint," in the zone between the static and the changing, the spectral emerges. A spectre is always a *revenant* (one who returns), and with this return, a connection between the past and the present is established.⁴ In the "dark unknown ... at the centre of the piece,"⁵ this concurrence of past and present fosters a destabilizing ambiguity. In "Lament" (1900), Rainer Maria Rilke invokes



⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 1st ed., ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1982).

this temporal ambiguity through a contemplation of the spectral light in the night sky:

Everything is far
and long gone by.
I think that the star
glittering above me
has been dead for a million years.
I think there were tears
in the car I heard pass
and something terrible was said.
A clock has stopped striking in the house
across the road...
When did it start? ...
I would like to step out of my heart
and go walking beneath the enormous sky.
I would like to pray.
And surely of all the stars that perished
long ago,
one still exists.
I think that I know
which one it is –
which one, at the end of its beam in the sky,
stands like a white city ...⁶

Contemplating starlight, Rilke's subject, like viewers of *The Soniferous Æther*, hopes that the star upon which he gazes still exists, despite knowing it is extinct. Rilke's subject knows that the star is gone, that the ethereal light reaching through the darkness is millions of years old, merely a remnant of its former existence. Like the glimmering of starlight, *The Soniferous Æther's* flickering columns of light that project into the sky suggest the last vestiges of life, the nearly imperceptible trace of a dead world. *The Soniferous Æther* documents a catastrophe that has both already occurred and has yet to happen.

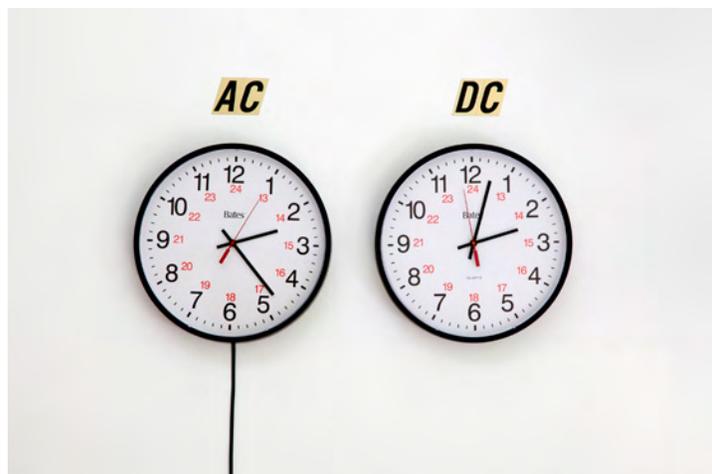
The eerie, melancholic soundtrack of *The Soniferous Æther* is reminiscent of electrical pulses transmitted along a telegraph wire and can be imagined to be the muted, indistinct tones of a fractured Morse code message, the distorted residue of electromagnetic radio transmissions that failed to reach their intended destination. Stankieveh recorded ambient sound at CFS Alert and tweaked it to suggest the barely discernible echoes of distant industrial noise. But the soundtrack has a vaguely musical quality as well. Stankieveh



Charles Stankiech
The Wreck of Hope
2013
COURTESY CHARLES STANKIECH



Charles Stankiech
Production still from *The Soniferous Æther
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COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE MONTRÉAL
MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, PURCHASE, THE
MUSEUM CAMPAIGN 1988-93 FUND



Left
Installation view of *AC/DC* (2013)
by Charles Stankieveh. Two
wall clocks, metal tags. Photo:
Charles Stankieveh

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE
MONTREAL MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS.
PURCHASE, THE MUSEUM CAMPAIGN
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Opposite, left
Installation view of *Monolithic
Memory, Exact Wording of
the Threat, Game Theory and
Destination Alert* (2011) by Charles
Stankieveh. Artifacts, framed.
Photo: Charles Stankieveh

COURTESY CHARLES STANKIEVECH

Opposite, right
82°29'58" N, 62°20'5" W (2011) by
Charles Stankieveh. Postcard,
redacted.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE
COLLECTION OF BRYNE MCLAUGHLIN



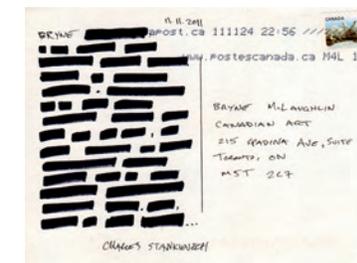
Above
Installation view of *Glenn Gould's
Goldberg Variations, 1955* (2013) by
Charles Stankieveh. Vinyl record.
Photo: Charles Stankieveh

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE
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also sampled the aria from Glenn Gould's recording of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Of the *Goldberg Variations*, Gould said that it "observes neither end nor beginning, [offers] neither real climax nor real resolution."⁷ While the soundtrack of *The Soniferous Æther* reinforces the physical circuit of the film loop itself, this constant repetition offers no resolution. As Stankieveh has observed, "the decaying piano loop finds its echo again in the loop of the film's narrative structure and material properties."⁸ Alluding to this repetition, he has noted:

The loop or the compulsion to repeat occurs after [a] trauma simply because it does not fit within an accepted understanding. The loop occurs not because we project a ... potential trauma, but rather because ... we ... are unable to incorporate ... and communicate it to others; this is a second trauma: not as event, but as failure.⁹

According to psychoanalytic theory, repetition cannot master trauma. In repetition, there is indeed an urge toward the therapeutic, but the repetition inevitably takes on a dynamic of its own and itself becomes traumatic.



⁷ Glenn Gould, *Bach: The Goldberg Variations*, CD (1956; Columbia Masterworks ML 5060), liner notes.

⁸ "Into the Aether with Charles Stankieveh."

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Reza Negarestani, *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2008): 26-28.

Stereotypically, the Arctic is portrayed as an empty, pristine, white wilderness devoid of human settlement. Formerly inaccessible, the Arctic is increasingly being promoted as ripe for industrialization. It has become increasingly feasible as a route for the transportation of resources as a result of the melting of the polar ice cap caused by global warming. The ever-longer periods of time during which this relative lack of ice prevails each year means that the voyage from Europe to Asia will be reduced by two weeks, making the Arctic Ocean a much desired route for shipping. Seven countries currently lay claim to land within the Arctic Circle. These states are interested in the Arctic because it is estimated to hold the world's largest untapped oil reserves. There are powerful interests committed to the exploitation of the Arctic, no longer simply because of its strategic location or its capacity to host covert communication surveillance, but because of the petroleum reserves that lie beneath the melting glacial ice. Oil is the geological product of sunlight. Through the processes of photosynthesis and decomposition over time, it is literally dead: oil is death. Reza Negarestani describes oil as the black corpse of the sun, that "wh[ich] annihilates societies by tearing them apart."¹⁰ The spectre that haunts

The Soniferous Æther of the Land Beyond the Land Beyond is the darkness of a world without us.

The author gratefully acknowledges Alysse Kushinski, Cody Lang, Janine Marchessault and Jon Petrychyn.

Un monde sans nous : *The Soniferous Æther of the Land Beyond the Land Beyond* de Charles Stankieveh

L'artiste canadien Charles Stankieveh a réalisé *The Soniferous Æther of the Land Beyond the Land Beyond* (2013) — une installation filmique 35 mm en noir et blanc avec artéfacts connexes — à la Station des Forces canadiennes Alert, un avant-poste actif de surveillance militaire situé sur la pointe du nord-est de l'île Ellesmere dans la région de Qikiqtaaluk au Nunavut, à 817 kilomètres du pôle Nord géographique. Dans le présent essai, Carmen Victor se penche sur la noirceur qui est à la base de l'œuvre, explorant l'ambiguïté temporelle qui découle du fait d'être dans le noir vingt-quatre heures par jour. Elle situe l'œuvre en lien avec la politique de la région arctique circumpolaire et les changements climatiques.