

## Charles Stankieveh: *Over the Rainbow, Under the Radar*

by Vicky Chainey Gagnon

Charles Stankieveh is fascinated with the history of communications and architecture. In his practice, - a practice always focused on site - he performs extensive fieldwork<sup>1</sup> to the point of recording from as far north as the Beaufort Sea and to the desert of the Middle East. His recent fieldworks have brought to light latent histories particularly related to military experiments and questions of sovereignty in the North and elsewhere. The exhibition *Over the Rainbow, Under the Radar* brings together two such interconnected projects - *Distant Early Warning* and *Ghost Rocket*, where Stankieveh investigates Cold War military architecture and their transmissions in military defence. In both their factual and fictional elaborations in his work, Stankieveh makes the viewer think through the framework of the geodesic dome, radio transmissions and via the trope of the rock and roll tour.

For the *Distant Early Warning* project, Stankieveh visited the actual sites of Cold War military outposts to acquire field recordings of the ice and electromagnetic pulses which he then re-broadcast through radio. Stankieveh performed extensive research on the subject, including on the geodesic dome, which he calls “one of the first known architectures to introduce an international theatre of communication and networked warfare,” (Charles Stankieveh, Artist Statement, 2009). The *Distant Early Warning* project that Stankieveh created refers to an actual site constructed between 1954 and 1956 as a long distance radar and communication system in the North by US Air Force and the Royal Canadian Airforce that was concerned with the development of missile defence infrastructure during the Cold War. A feat of design, the *Dew Line* was also a exploratory project – a string of radars, ultimately stretching from Greenland to Alaska that conscripted the high Arctic into service for continental defence. In Stankieveh’s formulation, the *Dew Line* became *the Distant Early Warning* project - a distant listening station, recording the transmitting system for the sounds of river flow and shifting ice that was broadcast on a local radio station and over the Internet. The fieldwork was set up in Dawson City, Yukon where a geodesic dome rested on the frozen crossing point of the Yukon and Klondike Rivers. As a sculptural installation with solar powered built-in LED system, it ‘lit up’ the process of geographical surveying with its moving, aurora-like colours and produced continual recording and radio transmission. Stankieveh’s *Distant Early Warning Project* was also temporally theorized: it culminated on the 100th anniversary of the discovery of the North Pole on April 6th, 2009 with a live concert using the real time radio broadcast from the installation.

*Ghost Rockets World Tour* is the counterpoint to the *Distant Early Warning* project, inspired by the expansion of missile defence infrastructures during and after the Cold War. It is a series of 12 rocket launches performed by the artist that occurred in 12 months (between 2009 and 2010) at different sites around the world. It represents a tactical mapping of the history of ballistics: from the birth of military rocketry in Europe, through MIT laboratories and the NASA space program, to US Military bases in the desert and DARPA research stations in the Arctic. The actual *Ghost Rockets* (also called Scandinavian ghost rockets) were unexplained rocket or missile-shaped unidentified flying objects sighted in 1946, mostly in Sweden and nearby countries. Due to the ways they were sometimes seen to move, it was thought they came from the former German rocket facility at Peenemünde and were long-range tests by the Russians of captured German V-1 or V-2 missiles. This prompted the Swedish Army to issue a directive stating that “newspapers were not to report the exact location of ghost rocket sightings, or any information regarding the direction or speed of the object.”<sup>2</sup>

Joining the four videos on view, the exhibition features artefactual elements left behind from the *Ghost Rocket* tour including several talismans (a zippo lighter, Sand pile, meteorites, crystals...)

a poster and some launch pads. In the exhibition space these remind the viewer of the material processes and conceptual resonance at root of Stankieveh's practice. In calling these objects talismans the artist points to what is also unique about the Northern landscape – its indigenous histories. Like a shaman, Stankieveh shows the igloo and the aurora borealis through a different eye, perfectly captured in their translation into the lit dome, which radiates a spectrum of color like the Northern Lights. Stankieveh's conceptual mappings - outpost architecture, military colonialisation, electromagnetic anomalies, polar ice caps, outer space aesthetics, counter culture utopias and indigenous architecture, - form a constellation in the exhibition space that demonstrate the impact, amongst other things, that the military has had on the history of communications.

#### Notes

1. As defined by the artist in a recent curatorial essay for the *Magnetic North* exhibition held at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery in 2010: "A *fieldwork* engages with the geographic site but then warps one's perception of the space comparable to a mathematical "strange attractor". Sharing, on the one hand, the history of the 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."

2. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost\\_rockets](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_rockets)