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MAGNETIC NORTHS: A CONSTELLATION OF CONCEPTS TO NAVIGATE THE EXHIBITION

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Charles Stankievich, *DEW Project*, from *Magnetic Norths*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University. Photo Paul Litherland.

From afar, the shifting phenomenon of magnetic north provides guidance not unlike Polaris, but as one draws close to the shadowy realm of the Arctic, navigation and communication begin to go awry, forcing the nomad to experiment

within a no-man's land. Military and religious colonization, hazardous testing, and a disregard for a fragile ecosystem mark the past of the Arctic, but so do inventive and sensitive histories. Within the White Cube of the gallery — here posited as a substitute for the minimalist landscape of the Arctic Sublime — the exhibition takes as its starting point Mercator's imaginative speculation of dual magnetic north poles from 1595, and ends with recent geomatic renderings by an indigenous government. Between these visual landmarks, a constellation of documents, photographs, sculptures, radio broadcasts, film screenings and installations weave together the overlapping territories of utilitarian artifacts and conceptual artwork. The survey of work starts with techno/military enterprises such as those of Thomas Edison, R. Buckminster Fuller, Canada's NFB, and the US Air Force; revisits conceptual art from the 1960s and '70s by Glenn Gould, N.E. Thing Co., Lawrence Weiner, Michael Snow, Joyce Wieland and others; and includes a selection of contemporary artists whose work combines both axes. Far from being an empty *terra incognita*, the Arctic, and like it, *Magnetic Norths*, functions both as a historical repository and as a fantasy projection space that generates electro-magnetic distortions, pay dirt, pissing contests, sci-fi warfare, psychedelic skies, conspiracy theories, critical confections, shamanistic loss and shattered cartographies.

Aurora Borealis

Whether believed to be spirits travelling across the sky or solar radiation colliding with the magnetosphere, the northern lights have captured the imagination of elders, explorers, scientists, tourists and artists alike. Before this past century, we did not understand solar radiation interacting with the magnetosphere created such luminescent skies, and with this epistemological gap folkloric explanations flourished, ranging from ghost stories to people claiming they can hear them. Nowadays, we can create the outer space light show artificially, with high-powered ionospheric radio experiments like HAARP (High Frequency Active Auroral Research) or High Altitude Nuclear Explosions (HANE).

Boundaries

“A border is not a connection but an interval of resonance” said Marshall McLuhan, discussing the Arctic region of Canada between Russia and the United States. Like the drifting snowbanks of the tundra, the northern landscape is constantly in flux, both geologically and politically. Here boundaries are not only fluid and constantly under negotiation, they overlap and bleed into each other. The Arctic Circle, commonly thought of as a line existing at 66°N, is in actuality a shifting zone based on celestial movement, while the debate over what should be considered “North” has been a long-standing issue, not limited to the political demarcation known as “North of 60.” After decades of negotiations, Land Claims in the North have finally been agreed to between the Crown and First Nations (as recently as the last ten years). Now they are being further negotiated between sovereign First Nations, who must adapt to a type of mapping incongruent with the nomadic hunting patterns exercised on their Traditional Territory. At the same time, Canada has been known to justify sovereignty within the Arctic archipelago using the argument that aboriginals migrate across the ice: fancy footwork in the effort to exercise jurisdiction over the melting Northwest Passage, which countries around the world desire to exploit for faster shipping routes. Furthermore, in hoping to gain more real estate from which to extract natural resources, polar countries around the northern hemisphere are attempting to expand their jurisdiction northward, beyond the traditional 200-nautical-mile coastal buffer zone, using scientific claims that a nation’s continental shelf extends under the Arctic Ocean. There are few places on earth with so many internationally disputed boundaries, continually shifting due to celestial, cultural, economic, political and scientific pressure.

CBC

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation is a Crown corporation created in 1936 and utilized as a nationalist propaganda media network via radio and TV, and

now, additionally, via the Internet and satellite radio. The CBC has a special division for the North that includes custom programming for the region with attention to local community events and languages. Over the years, the CBC has also commissioned a host of new compositions, such as R. Murray Schafer's *North/White* for orchestra and snow machine, and produced a variety of ethnomusic recordings, as well as a number of radio and TV documentaries, including Glenn Gould's seminal "Idea of North" radio documentary of 1967.



View of Room B from *Magnetic Norths*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University.
Photo Paul Litherland.

Conceptual Art

During the 1960s and '70s a style of conceptual art emerged in Canada that constructed the triad: *landscape – performance – document*. In some scenarios, the performance was paired with the artist and the document with a theorist or critic. The paragon example of this type of production was in a Northwest Territories expedition involving N.E. Thing Co., Lawrence Weiner and Harry Savage along with Lucy Lippard. The creation of these ephemeral works—urinating in the snow or walking around the city for NETCO, shooting a rifle and

diverting water for Weiner, and freezing ice into chains by Savage—would have largely gone unnoticed in the remote location if not for the documentation of the projects by Lippard, who photographed the production of the work and then later wrote about it. NETCO formalised this symbiotic relationship in their piece “Lucy Lippard Walking Toward True North,” drawing attention to art’s normally invisible partner and placing her into the frame of the aesthetic landscape she created in tandem with her written contextualisation.

Document

In a landscape subject to extreme change from season to season, a “land” that is sometimes composed of frozen water, and a region remote from the majority of a nation’s population, the document is necessary to communicate ephemeral events that transpire in a remote environment. Whether it takes the form of a sound recording by Glenn Gould or Jean-Jacques Nattiez, a poster from an N.E. Thing Co. performance, an NFB documentary, or a photographic essay on the Alaskan Pipeline by the Center for Land Use Interpretation, the document is necessary to present an idea, event or place that few people are able to witness in person. Not possessing such documents creates the same problematic situation faced by the explorers Cook and Peary when trying to prove that they had in fact reached the North Pole. Inversely, because of the planning necessary to conduct projects in the North, sketches, blueprints, maps and other utilitarian documents are needed to ensure the successful implementation of such ventures. Both types of documents thus become artifacts and residues of endangered cultures or executed expeditions.

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 the 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.

Geodesic Radome

First built in Germany prior to the Second World War to house the Zeiss planetarium in Berlin, the geodesic dome was popularized by its American patent-holder, R. Buckminster Fuller. During the early 1950s, Fuller collaborated with the MIT’s Lincoln Lab and the US Department of Defense to create the first ridged radar domes, or radomes, to house Arctic radar antennas capable of functioning in severe wind, temperature and ice conditions, while being efficient to transport and assemble. The distributed engineering design of the geodesic was a precursor to the ARPANET program and can be seen as a symbol of modern warfare's shift from direct conflict on a shared front to contemporary electromagnetic combat via distributed networks. By the end of the 1960s, the geodesic dome’s iconic status as DEW (Distant Early Warning) architecture had been subverted by alternative cultures like Drop City as a means of expressing Fuller’s concept of “Spaceship Earth” and ecological concerns. Today, geodesic domes represent the ambiguity of invisible military operations in the electromagnetic realm, as well as counter-culture utopias—all while referencing another type of polar dome: the igloo.

Hothian Warfare

Few regions are as visibly marked by the presence of military experimentation and infrastructure as the Arctic, even though, ironically, there is little if no history of active combat in the Arctic Theatre. Because of its involvement in telecommunications, the establishment of settlement outposts, scientific support,

mapping, training and exploration, the military has a long history in the Arctic—perhaps because few other organizations can afford the investment needed to work in the environment or feel the extreme need to be present in the harsh climate (petroleum corporations being the major exception). Spawned by the film *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, the term "Hothian Warfare" refers to strategies in polar regions that use advanced technology verging on the fantastical. These include, but are not limited to, ALERT and DEW radar outposts, High Altitude Nuclear Explosions (HANE) and missile testing, the stratospheric Strategic Defense Initiative (STAR WARS), the High Frequency Active Auroral Research Project (HAARP), patrolling nuclear submarines surfacing through pack ice, remote drones exploring the seabed and floating nuclear oil exploration stations off the coast of Russia.

Landscape

Whether one looks at the Group of Seven, Emily Carr, Glenn Gould, Margaret Atwood, R. Murray Schafer, or other iconic Canadian artists across all genres, it is clear that the landscape plays a defining role in the ideology of "Canadian Art." Even artists from abroad come to Canada to situate their work specifically within the Canadian landscape; for instance, such works as Robert Smithson's first planned earthwork (the unrealized Island of Broken Glass), Lucy Lippard and Lawrence Weiner's expedition to Inuvik, NWT with N.E. Thing Co., or Andy Goldsworthy's natural sculptures in Nova Scotia. The Landscape is not only a place, it is also a material and a force to be reckoned with. In the case of the Arctic—the most iconic of Canada's ecosystems—the minimalist landscape retains a particular aura of fantasy, as a place where both nothing and anything can transpire much like Andrei Tarkovsky's "*Zone*."



Laurent Grasso. HAARP. From *Magnetic Norths*. Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery. Photo Paul Litherland.

Mapping

The Arctic is difficult to represent in any form—best exemplified in its status as one of the last places on earth to be mapped. With the standard Mercator projection (the one we are familiar with from scholastic walls and Google Maps), the territory is increasingly distorted as one moves north, to the extent that the North Pole is infinitely expanded into a line across the top of the map. But without maps, nationhood cannot be defined, resources cannot be claimed, and transportation routes cannot be set. As a result, the map —whether carved into Inuit tactile coastal maps or created with the latest in geomatic technology— becomes a condensed site of ideological projection. This is as true for the fantastical Mercator map of 1595, which depicts a magnetic mountain and four continents at the North Pole, as it is for the reclamation of Traditional Territory from industrial and political forces by the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation's government.

National Film Board (NFB)

Although perhaps best known worldwide for its *auteur* animation films, the NFB is also synonymous with the invention of the “documentary” genre under the theoretical guidance of John Grierson, the first to use the term and the founding NFB commissioner. As an arm of government interested in developing audio-visual media for social change, the NFB's work has gone through several phases, ranging from war propaganda at its birth in the 1940s and '50s, to more culturally focused productions that serve as the billboard for an ethnically diverse nation with a continuing focus on Northern Identity.

No-Man's / Nomad's Land

Throughout history, the Arctic has been seen as a "no-man's land," the last frontier, or just an empty space to conquer and extract resources from. Thankfully, however, because of the increasing acknowledgement of the indigenous population that traditionally migrated across the tundra and ice, following herds of caribou and other animal life, the region is now seen more as a *nomad's land* full of history. This point is especially notable when the Arctic is contrasted with Antarctica, where there is no indigenous human population and only the recently arrived scientists and tourists who are nomadic in a different sense.

Outer Space

Our aesthetic of Outer Space shares a similar aesthetic with the Arctic: utilitarian outpost architecture, a barren landscape and the harshest of weather replicate “off-world” existence. Tethered to the more populated world by a network of trade and supply while remaining shrouded in mystery, it is no wonder, then, that science fiction and fantasy films often place secret bases at the Poles or use a frozen stage set, where a psychological and geographical “aesthetic of distance” is inherent. Continuing a well trodden stage of Arctic spectacle, a quick sampling

of blockbuster films demonstrates our fascination with the Polar world as "other world": *Superman's* crystal Fortress of Solitude, Ozymandias' Antarctic base in *Watchmen*, *Blade Runner's* off-world replicants' residence in the Yukon Hotel, the *Predator vs. Alien* hunting gauntlet buried deep under the ice, the *Golden Compass's* evil research facility Bolvangar, *Frankenstein's* final demise as witnessed by a North Pole expedition, and so on. Inversely, in the conceptual art world, Michael Snow's film *La Région Centrale* used his imagined version of moon footage to frame his vision of the North: "The film will become a kind of absolute record of a piece of wilderness. Eventually the effect of the mechanized movement will be what I imagine the first rigorous filming of the moon surface."

Radio

Precipitated by the Klondike Gold Rush, the US Army started experimenting with wireless technology in Alaska (and possibly the Yukon, as precise maps were just then being drafted of the disputed region). Appropriating the derelict Overland Telegraph Line from the mid 19th century, by 1902 the Army worked with Marconi's company to complete the system with wireless telegraph connections between remote bases, creating one of the earliest wireless communications networks and connecting the Arctic to the rest of the continent. Eventually this system would evolve into the ionospheric troposcatter networks of White ALICE and the DEW Line before rising upwards into satellites. Today HAARP is the next-generation experimental radio research station, buried away in the interior of Alaska a few hours from the Canadian border and shrouded in a veil of mystery. On the civilian front, CBC links the northern landscape together with its nationalistic broadcasts, connecting isolated communities across the vast landscape.

Shamanism

Part of the Inuit cosmology, shamanism represents an interesting precursor to Canadian performance art in the Arctic, where landscape, ritual and myth are

interwoven. With the advent of colonialism and evangelicalism, shamanism declined as a binding cultural force. It is possible that modern practices such as filmmaking and the other arts will rejuvenate this lost role in a contemporary world where old and new cultures collide.

Sovereignty

From the initial migration of Arctic aboriginals (First Nations, Inuvialuit and Inuit) to the twenty-first-century carving up of the Arctic Ocean seabed like a cake to be devoured, the issue of sovereignty is continually evolving in the North—partly because of its nomadic population (indigenous people, civilian contractors and military personnel), partly because it borders on so many different nation states, and partly because of the developing body of knowledge about the region.

Exacerbating this situation are the vast untapped natural resources counterpointed by the significant cost in fiscal resources to patrol, defend and occupy the area. In the past, Canada has used various tactics to enforce sovereignty, such as forcing the relocation of Inuit to maintain occupation, and intends, in the future, to increase its military presence and upgrade satellite surveillance.

Warm War

The Warm War is the new conflict arising around the issues of sovereignty and ownership of natural resources in the polar regions as a result of global warming.