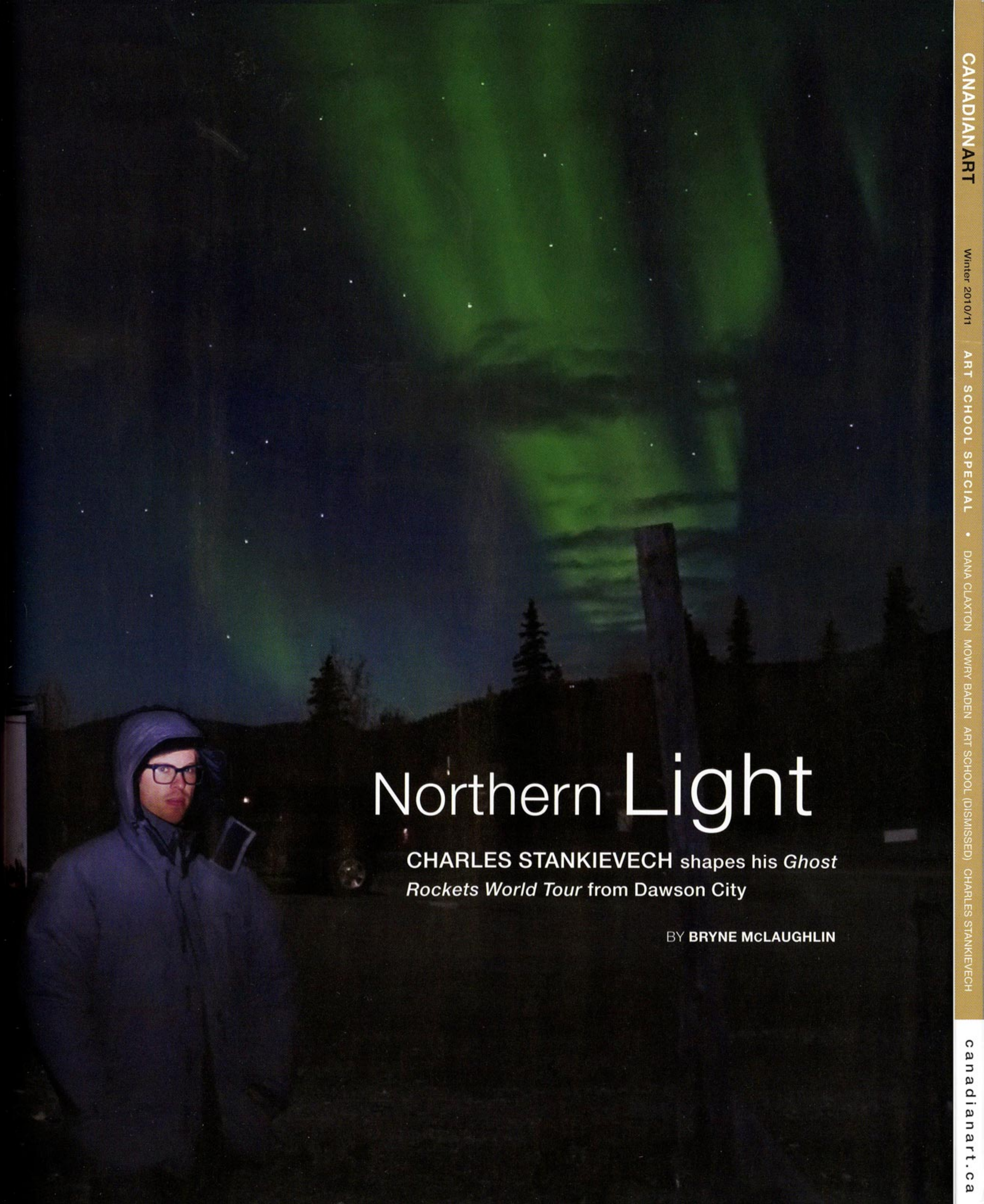


It's a week before the fall term starts at the Yukon School of Visual Arts (Yukon SOVA), and Charles Stankievecch is breathing a sigh of relief, glad to be back home and in his studio in Dawson City. The past few months have been something of a blur for the 32-year-old artist and Yukon SOVA co-founder and instructor. A week earlier, Stankievecch was on a transpolar flight from Frankfurt to Whitehorse, a nine-hour, over-the-cap express route designed to ferry European vacationers to and from the Yukon during the summer tourist season. Days before that, he was in Venice for the opening of the 12th International Architecture Exhibition, a whistle stop that marked the final leg of a three-month European odyssey.

In mid-June in Finland, he delivered a paper on the history of headphones, space and sound art at the World Forum for Acoustic Ecology conference. After that, Stankievecch spent the summer darting across the continent, with stops in 15 cities, including an artist residency in Portugal and an international group exhibition in Germany. Add to the mix a lost passport and travel visas, and a torn hand tendon, and you get the idea that Stankievecch is due for a break. It won't happen, however—not with the full-time teaching load of a school year about to begin, a solo exhibition opening at Montreal's Galerie Donald Browne in October, hand surgery pending and a slew of new projects in the works.

A summer spent living out of suitcases and in airport lounges is not out of the ordinary for an artist in an era when a nomadic professional life has become part of many artistic practices. Thanks to the growth of international art markets, online connectivity and budget air travel, the borders of the art world have dissolved. In the past, artists could feel geographically and culturally landlocked, but global mobility and exposure have opened up a plethora of new opportunities. It's young

Charles Stankievecch outside his Dawson City studio, October, 2010  
PHOTO ANNA-SOPHIE SPRINGER



# Northern Light

CHARLES STANKIEVECH shapes his *Ghost Rockets World Tour* from Dawson City

BY BRYNE MCLAUGHLIN



artists like Stankieveh—with multi-faceted practices that hinge on the ability to travel and connect—who offer a glimpse into where the international art world is headed in the coming decades.

A whirlwind of teaching, art-making and travel has been the norm for Stankieveh ever since he arrived in the Yukon in 2007. Before that, he was living in Montreal, where he completed an MFA in Studio Arts at Concordia University. He then heard from a friend about an ambitious new art school in Dawson City that was seeking skilled contributors to help write and organize its foundation-year curriculum. “To start the school fresh, design a curriculum and look at a model of experimenting in the classroom that wasn’t tied to a larger bureaucracy was exciting,” Stankieveh says, thinking back to the beginning. “It was also a nice opportunity to look at a holistic model for art education. They were looking for an instructor and administrator, so I thought I could really decide how the school could be formed.” The opportunity to start from the ground up—with notions in mind of Joseph Beuys and his Free International University, and the radical interdisciplinary structure of Black Mountain College—was too good to pass up, so Stankieveh applied for and got the job. Since then, he has split his time between Dawson City and Montreal—and, as often as possible, other international points.

“In the first year we poured so much energy into the school that it almost killed us. We were burnt out,” recalls Stankieveh. “But it also created an intense energy around the school, and that was interesting.” He credits Yukon SOVA’s operational structure. Conceived as a collaboration between the grassroots art collective Dawson City Arts Society, the accredited Yukon College and the Tr’ondëk Hwëch’in First Nation, the school offers a small core of first-year students a foundational one-year “jump start” into studio practices and art history that can then be transferred to a second year of study at its partner art schools: Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Ontario College of Art and Design University, Alberta College of Art and Design and Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University. Yukon SOVA is a rare example of cross-cultural, cross-institutional cooperation that puts an emphasis not only on foundational studies but also on making connections to communities and sites, from collaborations with local and First

Nations residents to excursions to Gold Rush-era mines and ghost towns.

Another key factor for Stankieveh is the school’s geographic and cultural remoteness. Despite its natural beauty and rich history, the Yukon is still *terra incognita* for most. That overlying locational mystery, combined with significant connections to the local community and environment, has allowed Stankieveh the freedom to design a curriculum that weighs heavily on notions of engagement, exploration and experimentation. “What I’m concerned with here is the same as what I’m concerned with in my art practice—looking at where you’re at, the strengths and history of the site and how it relates to other contexts. For me, it’s all about working with students and saying, ‘look, you’ve chosen to come here and be in my class, so let’s see what’s unique about this place, and from that figure out how you can engage in it and make something fascinating out of this experience.’ My approach wouldn’t be different anywhere else.”

From the beginning, Stankieveh has considered this experimental



ABOVE: **The DEW Project**  
(installation view) 2009 Pavilion,  
dome and antenna. Dome: 3 m  
diameter; antenna: 4 m high

OPPOSITE: Yukon School of Visual  
Arts building in Dawson City, 2007  
PHOTO CHARLES STANKIEVECH

and experiential approach to teaching another tangent of his already wide-ranging art practice. As an artist, he is best known for projects that shift the perceptual boundaries between site, sound, object, history, pop culture and fantasy. His work is steeped in the critical legacy of postmodernism and its challenge to ideas of static reality (as an undergraduate, he specialized in political ideology and the writings of Franz Kafka and Slavoj Žižek), as well as the strategies of conceptual art. These interests show in Stankieveh’s writings and lectures on aural architectures and art (published by the MIT Press, among others) and in the recent exhibition “Magnetic Norths,” a research project on historical and conceptual interpretations of Northern realities that he curated for the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery in Montreal earlier this year.

His two most recent works, *The DEW Project* and the ongoing *Ghost Rockets World Tour* series, continue the story. Produced in the spring of 2009, *The DEW Project* is a multi-part examination of the Distant Early



Charles Stankievec and Haseeb Amed using the Earth Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences (EAPS) VisWall Screen at the Stata Center for the *Ghost Rockets World Tour* *Sympathy for the Devil* launch, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, May, 2010

BELOW: *Ghost Rockets World Tour* *Space Oddity* launch (video still), Edwards Air Force Base, Mojave Desert, California, October, 2009

Warning Line, or DEW Line. This joint Canadian-American military radar network was constructed at the height of the Cold War, and stretched across the Arctic to defend against the threat of Soviet bombers or a northerly land invasion. Deemed obsolete before it was fully operational, the DEW Line has come to represent not only the ironies and anxieties of that era's extreme political ideology, but also the first experimental roots of global communication networks and another mystification of the North.

Stankievec's work ranges across these multiple facets, reconsidering the DEW Line's conflicted presence and purpose in the North. For the project's "field work" component, he transported a sculptural replica of the DEW Line's landmark geodesic radome (designed by Buckminster Fuller, and a prime example of what Stankievec calls the "extreme architecture" of military technology) to the confluence of the Yukon and Klondike Rivers. Resting atop the frozen waterway, and using solar power, the dome structure was activated with an aurora-like display of LED lights

as submerged microphones recorded and transmitted sounds of river flow and shifting ice via radio and the Internet. Set against the harsh beauty of the site's remote location, the work is part-fact, part-fantasy, offering a glowing modernist vision of a future that has crash-landed in an unknown expanse, its distant signal reporting a natural soundscape into the digital ether of broadcast networks.

Versions of *The DEW Project* have since shown in Montreal as part of "Magnetic Norths," at the Deep Wireless Festival in Toronto, and at this summer's 16th International Symposium on Electronic Art in Germany—at a time when issues of Arctic sovereignty are again at stake, as Northern countries lobby for control of untapped natural resources. For Stankievec, the work situates contemporary political wrangling within the historical context of communication represented by the form of Fuller's geodesic dome: "This strange geometric shell not only illustrates the lasting presence of a now-redundant communication network," he says. "Its invisible

electromagnetic membrane also projects a fantasy of identity and security based on brute physical realities and the unseen—in this case, remote polar regions and restricted zones."

Stankievec's ongoing *Ghost Rockets World Tour* series is what he calls the "counterpoint" to *The DEW Project*. Whereas *The DEW Project* was heavily researched and fixed to a specific historical moment, *Ghost Rockets* is purposely spontaneous and mobile. Fashioned as a "rock 'n' roll world tour," it taps into related historical reference points as instances of performative spectacle. To date, the work is a series of 12 model rocket launches performed—often covertly and with the help of other artists—at sites associated with ballistic missile development. From the first work in the series—*Dark Side of the Moon (A Spectral Explosion in the Key of Impolex G)*, launched in June 2009 at Cape Canaveral, Florida, where Stankievec was in residence with the composer Alvin Lucier—to the most recent launches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and

in Finland and Russia this summer, Stankievec and his collaborators map an intertwining portrait of the myth and history of modern rocketry.

Stankievec's decision to take his *Ghost Rockets World Tour* to Finland and Russia is fitting. "Ghost rockets" is a term coined soon after the Second World War, as Sweden and other nearby countries reported around 2,000 unexplained missile sightings (most likely Russian tests of German V1 and V2 rocket technology). Russia is the metaphysical birthplace of rocket science, home to the late-19th-century mystic Nikolai Fedorov and the famed rocket theorist and science-fiction writer Konstantin Tsiolkovsky. Like these predecessors, Stankievec's focus with *Ghost Rockets* is on the speed, spectacle and spirit of the launch, rather than on the rocket or its trajectory. He doesn't exhibit his models, and the launches are often set off on the fly. Yet each rocket carries an iconic totem that is in some way related to the sites: a bolt from a geodesic dome, a meteorite fragment, a kitsch object. The artist thinks of these objects as counterparts to the ephemerality of the spectacles, talismans that remain. He even keeps a meteorite in his coin pocket at all times.

As for the year ahead in Dawson City, Stankievec will host the American artist Steven Badgett for a residency project at Yukon SOVA in January. He is editing video footage of a performance with smoke grenades shot on the Arctic Ocean as a Northern "colour-field" homage to both the American painter Jules Olitski and *The Purple Cloud*, an obscure science-fiction story. Stankievec will also travel to Alert, Nunavut, for a project with the Canadian Forces Artists Program. Plans are underway, too, for a summer residency with the California-based Center for Land Use Interpretation, and for other stagings of the *Ghost Rockets World Tour* at iconic Land Art sites (the loci of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* and James Turrell's *Roden Crater*, among others) in the American Southwest. That's a long way from Dawson City and the pressing realities of the school year ahead, but for Stankievec it all comes with the territory: "These things are always crazy constellations of weird connections," he says. "I never really know what's going to happen next." ■

