

**Arctic Exposure:
LOVELAND's Sublime Simulation of an
Endless Apocalypse**

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Charles Stankievecch's 2011 *LOVELAND* is a video and sound installation that simulates the experience of an endless apocalypse in the imitated atmosphere of an Arctic environment.¹ In an enclosed room, a large and unframed single screen displays video footage of a barren Arctic landscape. Motionless but for the wind-driven snow drifting across the picture plane, the video presents an eerie image of isolation, the entire room is painted and bathed in white light, appearing to be an extension of the environment on the screen [Fig. 1]. A melodic and industrial soundtrack emanates from multiple sound panels. The size of the screen – floor-to-ceiling, wall-to-wall – combined with the spatial illumination and surround-sound, create an immersive and atmospheric environment that absorbs the spectator and challenges the distinction between image and experience. The landscape is thus rendered less empty than at first appearance, as the spectator is encompassed, implicated and suggestively exposed to the elements. As the music increases in volume and intensity, a small cloud of purple smoke becomes visible on the horizon line in the distance. Carried forward by the wind, it gradually advances toward the viewer, gaining speed and momentum, visual and acoustic volume, expanding, until it completely fills the screen [Fig. 2-3]. The smoke then

1 *LOVELAND* was included in the 2011 Québec Triennial at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2011.

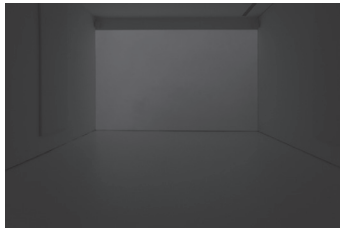
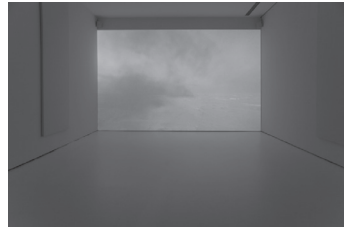


Fig 1(top) Fig 2(bottom)

Fig 3(top) Fig 4(bottom)

Fig. 1, 2, 3 Charles Stankieveh, *LOVELAND*, video installation view, 2011, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, photograph courtesy of artist

Fig. 4 Charles Stankieveh, *LOVELAND*, production still from shooting of *LOVELAND* on Arctic Ocean, 2009-2010, courtesy of artist

remains, rushing about madly and lapping at the border between the screen and the room—between the virtual and the real—before it suddenly subsides and the spectator is once again left with the desolate snowy landscape. The entire process takes a mere five minutes and then, fixed in an endless loop, begins again [Fig. 4].

The installation encompasses multiple references and Stankieveh himself has cited a number of significant inspirations for the work's production, foremost being Jules Olitski's 1968 Colour Field painting *Instant LOVELAND* and the artist's desire to transcend the constraints of the canvas and produce "nothing but some colours sprayed into the air and staying there."² By releasing a military smoke grenade over the frozen

2 Mark Lanctôt, "Nothing's About Nothing," *LOVELAND*, ed. Anna-Sophie Springer and Charles Stankieveh (Berlin: K. Verlag Press, 2011), p. 189.



Fig 5 Charles Stankievec, *LOVELAND*, video still from installation, 2011, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, courtesy of artist

Arctic Ocean, and capturing the event on film, Stankievec attempts to fulfill the impulse that Olitski could achieve only conceptually [Fig. 5]. Whitewashing the exhibition space for the construction of an indoor Arctic environment, Stankievec revisits and reanimates conceptions of the 'white cube,' challenging its traditional theorization as an alienating arena by multi-sensually engaging an embodied spectator. While abstract art and the structural limitations of modernist media specificity are thus acknowledged as significant ideological elements of the work, a further reference is made to Mathew Phipps Shiel's 1901 apocalyptic novel, *The Purple Cloud*, significantly set in the North Pole. A hand-bound version of the book is included in an illuminated wall vitrine just outside the main exhibition space [Fig. 6], and directly across from it, in a similar structure, is a Chatham emerald crystal fluorescing under ultraviolet light, surrounded by mirrors, and infinitely multiplied [Fig. 7]. The inclusion of these two objects imbues *LOVELAND* with an aura of science fiction, fear and fantasy.

This paper positions *LOVELAND* as an attempt to simulate an end-of-the-world experience by transposing the Arctic atmosphere into the gallery space and staging a sublime confrontation between the spectator, the Arctic and the end. Noting the myriad references included in *LOVELAND* and encompassing a discussion of the historical and contemporary significance of the Arctic in popular culture, aesthetics and

environmental politics, I suggest that Stankieveh employs an apocalyptic trope in reference to the precarious and problematic position of the North in the current political and ecological climate. Revisiting critiques of modernist exhibition practices and considering phenomenological approaches to perception, my analysis focuses primarily on the experience of the installation's spectator. Attending to the inclusion of Shiel's novel and acknowledging that apocalyptic fiction typically spares at least a single survivor to witness, lament and provide hope for the continuation of the species, I examine the role played by *LOVELAND*'s spectators as the only human actors present in the installation. Visually, aurally and phenomenologically immersed, the viewer is subjected to, and implicated in, the events unfolding on the screen and within the space. Due to the looping of the video footage, I argue that the imaged event is presented as endless – incessantly enacted, yet infinitely deferred – and that this temporality of interminable duration and delay is fundamental to the spectator's sublime apocalyptic experience. Indeed, *LOVELAND*'s spectator is enveloped in an unceasingly extended present moment: both rescued from the Rapture and denied access to the end.



Fig 6 Charles Stankieveh, *LOVELAND*, interior view of mirror vitrine with special *LOVELAND* edition of *The Purple Cloud* by M.P. Shiel behind diachronic glass, 2011, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, photograph courtesy of artist

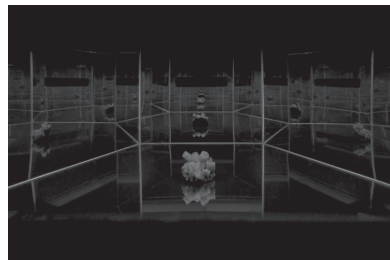


Fig 7 Charles Stankieveh, *LOVELAND*, interior view of mirror vitrine with Chatham Emerald Cluster fluorescing under Ultraviolet Light, 2011, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, photograph courtesy of artist

Northern Exposure

An Indoor Experience of the Outdoor Environment

In a performative re-enactment of Olitski's painting, Stankieveh released a cloud of purple smoke from a military grenade over the frozen Arctic Ocean. By producing "an experience of pure pictoriality, ironically close to that of the monochrome," he alludes to both the limitless Arctic environment and the limits of modernist media specificity.³ According to Mark Lanctôt, the context in which Stankieveh staged his re-enactment functions as an attempt to "direct us away from a-political modernist pictorial utopias"⁴ and draw attention to the political and ecological instability of the Arctic.

Stankieveh's performance took place in an increasingly militarized and sovereignly contested Arctic space, just north of a Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line radar station. The DEW Line was established by the cooperating Canadian and American air forces during the Cold War to assert jurisdiction over the Arctic and provide defense against potential Soviet attack. Still in place, it has been re-purposed to alert major changes in temperature or glacial formation as the polar ice cap continues to melt as well as asserting North America's sustained sovereign presence.⁵ Owing to contemporary concerns of climate change and increased pressure for natural resource extraction, the area has acquired renewed political significance. Stankieveh argues, "The threat in the theatre of the Arctic is... no longer of nuclear attack from an ideological opponent, but rather

3 Lanctôt, "Nothing's About Nothing," p. 193. Lanctôt reminds that strict monochrome painting was not highly valued by Greenbergian formalism, as "it was considered too close to sculpture and therefore drifted dangerously away from modernist medium-specificity."

4 Ibid.

5 For information on the contemporary state of the DEW line, see "Arctic Territory: The North Warning System," http://www.arcticterritory.tv/great-territory/north-warning-system/north-warning-system.htm#en_01_10_12_02.

the contention of national borders in the water.”⁶ As the Arctic ice begins to thaw, previously inaccessible areas will be opened and opportunities provided for increased exploitation of resources. In perverse circularity, the accessibility afforded by glacial melting will result in the extraction of fossil fuels and further carbon emissions, causing the ice to melt even more. Referring to this current context as the early stages of a new “Warm War,” Stankieveh posits the Arctic as an ecological battlefield on which the original participants of the Cold War conflict are mired again, this time over sovereignty and sustainability.⁷ Underlying and overpowering global competition for Arctic access and ownership is the area’s alarming contemporary climate. It is a space marked by “simultaneous grandeur and loss: the spectacular crashing of glaciers thousands of years in the making, 40 years in the melting.”⁸

By alluding to the precarious position of the Arctic in current environmental and military conflicts, Stankieveh’s installation references the catastrophic effects of human intervention in the atmospheric elements of the Earth. Submerging the room in white light and blurring boundaries between the virtual and the real, he attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the Arctic in an institution marked by enclosure and exclusivity, thus confronting common attempts to ameliorate environmental concern by providing greater indoor comfort. There is a certain absurdity to the proposition of experiencing an indoor Arctic, as the glacial region is still conceived as one of the most remote and uncultivated ends of the earth.

6 Charles Stankieveh, quoted in “Rainbows and Rigor...mortis: A Conversation Between Sophie Springer and Charles Stankieveh, March 2011,” *Distant Early Warning: DEW Line Exhibitions* (Whitehorse, YT: Yukon Arts Centre Gallery, 2011): p. 9.

7 Charles Stankieveh, “Artist Statement: *The Dew Project*,” *Distant Early Warning: DEW Line Exhibitions* (Whitehorse, YT: Yukon Arts Centre Gallery, 2011): p. 4.

8 Beth Kaputsa, “Sun Ship: Cape Farewell Aligns Art and Climate Change,” *Canadian Art* 28, no. 3 (Fall, 2011): p. 116.

Infiltrating the White Cube

Reinvesting Space and Spectatorship

There is a particular pertinence to Stankievech's sublime staging of the Arctic experience in the interior space of the gallery, as it is a highly mediated, temperature-controlled and sterile space, resolutely segregated from the rest of the world. In *LOVELAND*'s installation the gallery is transformed into a glacial environment, referencing at once the Arctic tundra and the "white cube" of the modernist gallery. In his seminal 1976 text, *Inside the White Cube*, Brian O'Doherty investigates the controlled context of modern art exhibitions. He argues, "The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space-occupying bodies are not."⁹ Elitist and artificial, he defines the white cube as an uncomfortable and alienating space in which the ideal art object – a modern abstract painting – is fixed on the gallery wall and the immobilized viewer is offered a purely optical and strategically structured experience. As Dawna Schuld asserts, "the white cube fosters an environment in which the sensing individual plays only a supporting role to a disembodied and discerning 'eye.'"¹⁰ Also denied entry to the exhibition space is any contamination from the outside world, so windows are sealed, the walls painted white and artificial light emanates from the ceiling to produce an aesthetically clinical climate.¹¹

In *LOVELAND*, Stankievech both parodies and provokes the architecture and aesthetics of the white cube by transforming the

9 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (San Francisco: The Lapis Press, 1976), p. 15.

10 Dawna Schuld, "Lost in Space: Consciousness and Experiment in the Work of Irwin and Turrell," *Beyond Mimesis and Convention: Representation in Art and Science*, ed. Roman Frigg and Matthew C. Hunter (New York and Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2010), p. 234.

11 O'Doherty, p. 15.

exhibition space into the Great White North and instigating an environmental interruption of the sacred space. Furthermore, by reproducing an alternative and updated version of Olitski's modernist painting, he supplies the space with an appropriate aesthetic object, but complicates the traditional notion of the white cube in a number of ways. Rather than occupying a distinct and delimited canvas appended to the wall, as would a modernist painting, *LOVELAND*'s unframed screen replaces the wall – it essentially becomes the wall. Confronted with the static, two-dimensionality of *Instant LOVELAND*, the amputated eye of modernism's conceptually crippled viewer is extended to explore the illusionistic depth and spatial immensity of the work in an attempt to virtually enter the painting. In contrast, the embodied spectator in Stankieveh's installation is effectively approached by the image on the screen as the cloud of purple smoke travels across the tundra and threatens to overcome or envelope its audience. Rather than distancing or alienating the viewer, *LOVELAND* immerses the spectator within a constructed and theatrical environment, providing a holistically optical, aural and phenomenological experience.

Composed by electronic sound artist Tim Hecker, *LOVELAND*'s musical score is as important as the work's visual elements. Hecker's composition – a hybrid ensemble combining sustained Arctic frequencies, industrial sounds, dissonance and melody – provides a listening experience of “sound's amplitude in space”¹² that mimics the voluminous silence of the Northern expanse. There is an irony to Stankieveh's choice of collaborator for his visual art installation, as Hecker typically refuses to be illuminated when performing and prefers rather to isolate both his

12 Louise Simard, “Live,” *La Triennale Québécoise 2011: Le travail qui nous attend*, ed. Marie Fraser, et al (Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2011), p. 0.01.22.

sound score and the listener from ocular stimulus of any kind. Keeping lights turned off and saturating the performance space in a blanketing fog, his intent is to produce a purely aural experience. Lanctôt argues that “the extremism of this approach” recalls the logic of Greenberg’s modernist media specificity, and that, “made for hearing rather than seeing,” sound should refer only to itself and be experienced without optical interference.¹³ In *LOVELAND*, however, Hecker makes an exception, providing an eerie and encompassing soundtrack for the enacting of the installation’s ambiguous narrative. One’s experience of *LOVELAND* is inescapably impacted by its musical accompaniment: the strangely cacophonous silence of the initially empty expanse; the rise in intensity as the mysterious cloud appears on the horizon and slowly begins to billow; and the crescendo when it overcomes the picture plane and threatens to consume the entirety of the exhibition space.

Entering into Stankievich’s reanimated white cube, *LOVELAND*’s viewer is illuminated, absorbed and aurally engaged. Perception becomes both embodied and durational as the spectator is encompassed in the unfolding event. In his neuro-phenomenological analysis of perception, Alva Noë argues that perceptual experience is dependent upon the possession and exercise of sensori-motor skills and thoughtful action: “*What we perceive is determined by what we do... we enact our perceptual experience; we act it out.*”¹⁴ According to Noë, the environment is made perceptually available to its inhabitant through movement and multi-sensory interaction. Following this, Noë asserts that the task of experiential art “ought to be not so much to depict or represent or describe experience, but rather to catch experience in the act of making the

13 Mark Lanctôt, “This Modernity,” *La Triennale Québécoise 2011: Le travail qui nous attend*, ed. Marie Fraser, et al (Montreal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2011), p. 00.01.01.

14 Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 1.

world available.”¹⁵ Noë provides extensive reference to James Gibson’s “ecological approach to visual perception,” wherein Gibson conceives of the environment as a complex ecology that offers a series of *affordances* by appealing to an animal’s sensory awareness.¹⁶ Gibson terms the structure of light in an environment, the “ambient optical array,” and argues that it specifies an area’s spatial layout and helps to orient the subject.¹⁷ The “ambient *acoustic* array,” provides additional information, most significantly, by establishing proximity between the animal and the event. The closer one is to an auditory source, the louder the sound will be and as one retreats from the source, the volume will gradually decrease.

Volume and proximity are key elements of *LOVELAND*’s ability to address the spectator. Through an aural and visual illusion, the video presents the smoke as actively approaching the viewer despite its confinement to the two-dimensionality of the screen. This visual effect is enhanced by the ambient acoustic array that implies a shortening of distance between the spectator and the sound source – the all-encompassing fog and its obscurantist threat. Through the production of a highly theatrical ambient environment, *LOVELAND* is “experiential” in the sense proposed by Noë as it makes visible an active and atmospheric world and encompasses the spectator in the unfolding of a multi-sensory event. While mimicking the ambiance of the white cube, *LOVELAND* challenges the sterility and stasis traditionally associated with the gallery space by drawing the viewer into a complete and complex aesthetic ecology.¹⁸

15 Ibid., p. 176.

16 James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1979), p. 127.

17 Noë, pp. 103-105. See also Chapter Five of Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*.

18 By confronting the alienation and exclusivity of the white cube, Stankievich can be considered alongside a number of artists engaging with institutional critique since the 1970s. What differentiates

O'Doherty argues that, in reaction to modernist antiseptics, the advent of Minimal Art instigated experiences that were not limited to visual perception.¹⁹ Confronted with minimalist objects, situated in the centre of the floor or protruding from the wall, the disembodied eye was obligated to reunite with the spectator and engage in a mobile procedure, rendering perception active and durational. This is, of course, one of the aspects of *literalist* art that is infamously targeted in Michael Fried's "Art and Objecthood." Fried laments the intrusion of objects in an institution devoted to the exhibition of art and argues that as a result of their very nature, literalist objects require a viewing experience marked by anthropomorphic confrontation and endless theatricality.²⁰ The experience of literalist art – Fried's term for Minimal Art – is one that "*persists in time... a presentment of endless or indefinite duration.*"²¹ The focus in the exhibition of minimal art becomes the experience itself. Indeed, denied a conclusive interpretation, the interpretative act itself is given precedence. The experience, writes Fried, "is inexhaustible... because there is nothing there to exhaust. It is endless the way a road might be: if it were circular, for example."²²

While *LOVELAND* cannot be described as a minimalist object, there is a similar sentiment to the installation's exhibition. Indeed, Stankieveh has

Stankieveh's work from earlier examples is also what makes it so contemporarily significant. Indeed, *LOVELAND*'s infiltration of the gallery space, refers to both the historical moment with which O'Doherty's writing was concerned and during which the arctic was of particular political importance, while also directly confronting current ecological and environmental concerns that have since become increasingly pressing. In this way, Stankieveh's work is comparable to other contemporary artists who use similar methods and materials in the construction of atmospheric installation environments, such as Olafur Eliasson.

19 O'Doherty, p. 50.

20 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* (June 1967), reprinted in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Bantock (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1968).

21 *Ibid.*, p. 144. Emphasis in original.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.

likened his phenomenological experiences in the Arctic to his experience viewing minimal art.²³ With a horizon at every direction and no visible boundary in sight, the Arctic provides an imaginative experience of utter endlessness. In direct reference to Fried's article, Stankieveh refers to Tony Smith's account of his experience driving on the unfinished New Jersey turnpike at night as similar to one's immersion in the incomprehensible breadth of the Arctic. As Smith writes of his experience entering into a darkened and seemingly limitless abyss, "It ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it."²⁴ Fried argues that what announced art's end to Smith was the essence of the experience "being able to go on and on indefinitely... the endlessness, or objectlessness of the approach or onrush of perspective."²⁵ What takes the place of the object is, for Fried, the endless experience – the replacement of art with the "theatricality of objecthood."²⁶

In a statement with obvious similarities to Smith's, Stankieveh asserts that no artistic representation can effectively communicate "the radical sublime of the Northern landscape."²⁷ While *LOVELAND* does encompass a pictorial dimension representative of the Arctic environment, the spectator is denied sustained contemplation of the image by the interruption of the amorphous cloud of purple smoke. Stankieveh both reveals and conceals the landscape from view and perpetually alternates between these two states through the looping of the

23 Stankieveh, in "Rainbows and Rigor...mortis: A Conversation Between Sophie Springer and Charles Stankieveh, March 2011," p. 12.

24 Quoted in Fried, p. 131.

25 Fried, p. 134.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

27 Stankieveh, in "Rainbows and Rigor...mortis: A Conversation Between Sophie Springer and Charles Stankieveh, March 2011," p. 12.

video footage – an element of the work that most forcefully asserts the endlessness of the experience. The spectator is subjected to an ongoing sublime confrontation with both the Arctic expanse and the experience of apocalyptic encroachment or envelopment.

The Northern Sublime Simulating an Arctic Apocalypse

In recent decades the North has become an area of great ecological and economic concern and has garnered the mixed attention of environmental activists, oil and energy companies, and national bodies all competing to stake claim to the space. Despite increased awareness of these issues, the exoticism of the Arctic tundra endures. Stankievech argues, “‘the North’ is composed of the dual nature of the brute reality of experience and the fantasy of projection.”²⁸ Indeed, the icy landscape has provided inspiration for sublime painting, science fiction films and apocalyptic narratives for centuries. The Arctic is popularly imagined as both primordial and futuristic, a potent symbol of both the world’s dramatic beginning and its devastating end.

Stankievech’s choice to include Shiel’s novel in his installation points to the ideological and imaginative implications of the North in art and popular culture. Written when the Arctic was still largely unexplored, certainly uncolonized and unexploited, *The Purple Cloud* is one of the earliest science fiction novels and a forerunner of the apocalyptic “last man alive” genre.²⁹ The book opens with a contest: a monetary prize of \$175 million dollars afforded the first man to reach the North Pole.³⁰ The

28 Ibid.

29 David G. Hartwell, “Introduction,” *The Purple Cloud* (Boston: Gregg Press, 1977): xiv–vx.

30 M.P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (Boston: Gregg Press, 1977).

story surrounds the experience of Adam Jeffson who, by duplicitous and devious means, succeeds in reaching this goal. A large portion of the novel is dedicated to description of the harrowing expedition through the treacherous tundra and the series of accidents and events that cause Jeffson's fellow travellers to perish. Those who somehow survive the onslaught of snowstorms, avalanches and polar bear attacks are simply left to freeze when Jeffson steals off in the night with the last of the sled dogs and dollar signs in his eyes. Soon after his success, it is revealed to Jeffson that a mysterious mantle of poisonous purple vapours has eliminated all other life on earth. The four pages of the text in which Jeffson reaches the pole and sees the ominous purple cloud are exhibited in Stankievech's installation.³¹ Simultaneously elated and terrified, it is at this moment that Jeffson begins to recognize and reconcile his solitary position in the world – a position that is confirmed as he traverses landscapes littered with the bodies of the dead.

After this point in the novel, the narrative devolves into an account of Jeffson's lonely tyranny as he tours the globe, pillaging and burning everything of worth that he encounters and spending seventeen years erecting an incomparably opulent palace. Eventually he unearths a living woman – beautiful and naked and having never learned to speak – whom he enslaves and exploits and eventually falls in love with. The two ultimately settle down, thus providing the human race with hope of eventual renewal. Despite its absurdity, the ensuing narrative does have pertinent implications for this analysis, as it elucidates both the greed and excess characteristic of human endeavor as well as the necessity of belief in salvation. Also relevant is the insinuation that the North somehow signifies the end of the world. Indeed, a constant figure in the beginning

31 Exhibited are pages 68-72 of Shiel's novel.

of the book is a maligned prophet who insists that there is “undoubtedly some sort of Fate, or Doom, connected with the Poles of the earth in reference to the human race”³² and he warns of the horrors that would befall the world if anyone trespassed upon such damned land. The mad ramblings of this eccentric character of course prove to be accurate and while the novel ends with the optimistic implication that people will again populate the globe – albeit the offspring of an abusive and contemptuous despot – the fraught ideology of the Arctic remains intact.

In *The Spiritual History of Ice*, Eric G. Wilson argues that the Arctic has been mythologized for centuries and, in an assertion easily applied to Shiel’s narrative, he claims “the virginal ices covering the poles have for centuries stimulated robust visions, serving as blank screens on which men have projected deep reveries – tyrannical narcissisms and spiritual sublimities.”³³ There is a dualism inherent in Arctic imaginings as both treacherous terrain and spiritual space that Wilson posits as tantamount to Western apocalyptic invocations. Similarly symbolized, the Arctic and the apocalypse conjure images of “both violent dissolutions of time and blissful revelations of eternal realms – annihilation and restoration, horror and joy.”³⁴

The image Wilson conjures of the Great White North thus verges on the sublime, particularly in the sense elaborated by Edmund Burke, and expanded by Immanuel Kant, as an experience mixing fear and delight – terror and awe.³⁵ Burke shifted consideration away from the

32 Shiel, p. 17.

33 Eric G. Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science and the Imagination* (New York: Pallgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 141.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

35 Simon Morley, “Introduction: The Contemporary Sublime,” *The Sublime: Documents in Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Morley (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), p. 15. See also Edmund Burk, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1968).

sublime object to focus primarily on the psychological *experience* of the beholder – an experience of perverse pleasure in encounters that might endanger survival.³⁶ Indeed, Burke insisted, “terror is in all cases... the ruling principle of the sublime.”³⁷ Jean-François Lyotard argues that the fundamental characteristic of Burke’s conception is that “the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening.”³⁸ The sublime experience must therefore be extended, sustained, so that the threat is not fulfilled. Lyotard argues that terror is a reaction to privation in the sense that, for example, one fears starvation when deprived of food, and he suggests that the warding off or lessening of the threat of danger induces a kind of suspenseful pleasure: “privation at one remove; the soul is deprived of the threat of being deprived.”³⁹ Evident in all referenced accounts is the effect of the sublime upon one’s emotional state. Indeed, Jean-Luc Nancy, following Kant, has elaborated upon the nature of sublime experience, claiming that it is in essence a feeling, “and yet, more than a feeling in the banal sense, it is the emotion of the subject at the limit.”⁴⁰

In *LOVELAND* Stankievech confronts the viewer with the sublime experience of both the Arctic and the apocalypse – two conceptual categories that are easily and historically blended. The Arctic footage is projected on such a large scale that it mimics the immensity of the

36 Ibid., pp. 15-17. Simon Morley asserts that in his 1790 *Critique of Judgment*, Kant “continued and deepened the shift of focus initiated by Burke, by asserting that the Sublime was not so much a formal quality of some natural phenomenon as a subjective conception.”

37 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 58.

38 Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” *Artforum* (April, 1984), reprinted in *The Sublime: Documents in Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Morley (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), p. 35.

39 Ibid., p. 35.

40 Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Sublime Offering,” *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 233.

environment pictured and the viewer is immersed and overcome by its size and scale. While the endless abyss of such an expanse is itself sublime, the spectator is then confronted with the onrushing of smoke in what I argue is a simulated apocalyptic encounter. The threat of envelopment by cloud is, as Burke would want it, kept contained – bound by the limits of the screen –but the installation’s immersive illumination and all-encompassing sound contribute to the sense that the spectator is both physically and phenomenologically surrounded. The occlusion of the initial landscape obscures the spectator’s vision and a brief period of suspense ensues in which it is unclear when and if the smoke will subside. The spectator is simply left to wait – a task that Bernard Schütze contends, “involves a heightened awareness of being caught in a time one cannot control.”⁴¹ When the smoke does clear the viewer is left again with the equally sublime serenity of the empty Arctic.

Stankievech’s reference to, and recreation of, Olitski’s painting adds a further dimension to the sublimity of the installation informed by Robert Rosenblum’s notion of the “Abstract Sublime.” Following Burke, Rosenblum expands the discussion of an aesthetic sublime from eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantic landscape painters to the abstract expressionist production of American modern art. He argues that the abstract sublime replaces the abrasive and awe-inspiring landscapes of Romantic painters with “a no less numbing phenomenon of light and void.”⁴² He suggests that one does not need to realistically represent rushing waterfalls or the crashing of glaciers to achieve an awesome

41 Bernard Schütze, “Matters of Waiting,” *La Triennale Québécoise 2011: Le travail qui nous attend*, ed. Marie Fraser, et al (Montreal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 2011), p. 00.04.13.

42 Robert Rosenblum, “The Abstract Sublime,” *ARTnews* 59, no.10 (February 1961), reprinted in *The Sublime: Documents in Contemporary Art*, ed. Simon Morley (London: Whitechapel Gallery and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), p. 110.

effect, but, rather, the sublime can be attained abstractly through either unleashed expressionistic strokes or the saturation of “limitless expanses with a luminous, hushed stillness.”⁴³ Of the essence is the sheer magnitude of the painting and the confrontation this provokes with the viewer. Rosenblum argues that the tiny figures represented by Romantic painters as “a bridge of empathy between the real spectator and the presentation of a transcendental landscape,” become, in this abstract language, no longer necessary.⁴⁴ Instead he insinuates that the spectator takes on the position of the “the monk by the sea” – the interlocutory figure that attenuates terror and functions as buffer between present reality and future indeterminacy.⁴⁵ In an example relevant to the present discussion, Rosenblum references Barnett Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1950-51), arguing that it “puts us before a void as terrifying, if exhilarating, as the arctic emptiness of the tundra.”⁴⁶

Rosenblum argues that the mid-twentieth century return of the sublime can be attributed to anxieties of the atomic age, which “correspond with a Romantic tradition of the irrational and the awesome as well as with a Romantic vocabulary of boundless energies and limitless space.”⁴⁷ In this context, he opens the work up to interpretation as a response to potential apocalyptic annihilation or “a post-World-War-II myth of Genesis.”⁴⁸ Referring, in part, to the same historical moment as Rosenblum, Stankieveh’s installation evokes the terror and uncertainty attributed the North during the Cold War and his video projection is easily taken for the exploding of a chemical weapon over the Arctic expanse – the anxiously

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., p. 111.

47 Ibid., p. 112.

48 Ibid., p. 111.

anticipated fallout of the Cold War's Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) strategy between North American and Soviet forces. The fact that *LOVELAND* documents the artist's release of a military smoke grenade lends weight to a reading of the video as the initiation of a nuclear winter. What must also be taken into account, however, is that contemporary threats of annihilation that implicate the Arctic cannot be solely attributed to the effects of war. Equally daunting today is the ecological instability of the area and the damaging effects of human occupation and exploitation of the environment.

Apocalyptic Infinity

Expanding Time and Delaying the End

Theology professor Walter Wink argues, "We are living in an apocalyptic time disguised as normal."⁴⁹ Responding to the reality of overpopulation, environmental unsustainability, pollution of air and water and chemical warfare, among other issues, Wink suggests that "the very viability of life on Earth today" is uncertain.⁵⁰ While awareness of the planet's peril has increased, Wink argues that the majority of the population has not been effectively inspired to deal with these myriad crises and he attributes this to the persistence of eschatological perceptions of ecological time in Western societies. Although eschatology encompasses apocalyptic imaginings in its narrative design, Wink argues that it regards the future as essentially open, undetermined and, thus, alterable: it is "the horizon of hope, possibility and becoming."⁵¹ The apocalyptic, on the other hand,

49 Walter Wink, "Apocalypse Now?" *The Christian Century* (October 17, 2001), accessed 1 December 2011, <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2208>.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

anticipates a pre-ordained and inevitable end. He asserts that when the end actually approaches, eschatology becomes apocalyptic and herein lies the redemptive element of the latter formation. “The positive power of [the] apocalyptic,” claims Wink, “lies in its capacity to force humanity to face threats of unimaginable proportions in order to galvanize efforts at self and social transcendence.”⁵²

It is Wink’s contention that society needs to acknowledge – even embrace – a notion of impending annihilation in order to accept and alleviate the gravity of the current conditions. Alarmist as Wink’s account may be, the proposal to incite awareness and enact a strategy of potentially infinite delay is essential to contemporary politics of ecology. In a paper presented in France at the 2009 conference “Les temps de l’écologie politique,” Luc Semal and Bruno Villalba similarly reference the tendency within ecological politics and policy to construct a meta-narrative of infinite duration, founded on the principles of progress and continuity.⁵³ As a radical interruption of this schema, the authors propose a hypothesis of delay that reintroduces an idea of the end into ecological temporality.⁵⁴ Addressing the potential pessimism interpreted in their mandate, Semal and Villalba argue that a notion of delay attends, rather, to the importance and value of the time remaining before the arrival of the end.⁵⁵ Similar to Wink’s suggestion, they imply that acknowledging the urgency of the situation could mobilize change and effectively limit

52 Ibid.

53 Luc Semal and Bruno Villalba, “Traduire l’urgence dans les décisions démocratiques: Contribution des discours ecologistes à la prise en considération de la notion de délai,” p. 3, (paper presented at the conference, “Les temps de l’écologie politique,” Saint-Martin-d’Hères, France, 7-9 September 2009), Accessed online, 1 December 2011, <http://www.congresafsp2009.fr/sectionthematiques/st40/st40.html>.

54 Ibid., p. 4.

55 Ibid.

the consequences of current ecological crises.⁵⁶

Semal and Villalba's argument is a direct reference to the sentiments of philosophers and political theorists working during the decades immediately following the Second World War.⁵⁷ Written in reaction to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Günther Anders' "Theses for the Atomic Age," for example, refers to the world-altering introduction of nuclear weapons into war and asserts, "at any moment The Time of the End could turn into the End of Time."⁵⁸ Appealing to the redemptive potential of apocalyptic action he argues, "we must do everything in our power to make The End Time endless."⁵⁹ More recently responding to a loss of faith in modernity's pursuit of progress and futuristic promises, Boris Groys argues, "the contemporary is constituted by doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, indecision – by the need for... a prolonged, even potentially infinite period of delay."⁶⁰ In a similar assertion, Bernard Schütze proposes temporality today as an experience of "unending immediacy in which time will not pass and become an event."⁶¹ As elucidated by both Schütze and art historian Christine Ross, contemporary artists have responded to this current condition by making the experience of time their *modus operandi* and asking the viewer to suspend temporal progression and occupy an extended present.⁶² Indeed, following François Hartog, Ross argues that the present has taken on temporal significance

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., p. 3.

58 Günther Anders, "Theses for the Atomic Age," *The Massachusetts Review* 3, no. 3 (Spring, 1962): p. 493.

59 Ibid.

60 Boris Groys, "Comrades of Time," *e-flux Journal* 11 (December 2009): p. 3.

61 Schütze, p. 00.04.17.

62 See Schütze and Christine Ross, "The Suspension of History in Contemporary Media Arts," *Intermedialités : histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques / Intermediality: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies*, no. 11 (2008): pp. 125-148.

in the contemporary moment “as a ‘worried’ present, anxious about the catastrophes of that past that it seeks to overcome, and the anticipated catastrophes of the future that it seeks to avoid.”⁶³ Contemporary artists have thus employed a series of strategies that draw attention to both the suspension and passage of time and Schütze argues that the act of waiting is increasingly encompassed in the experience of art.

Included in *LOVELAND*'s installation is a fundamentally temporal component that both corroborates and complicates the importance afforded waiting in contemporary art and this notion of “a chronic present and a deferred future.”⁶⁴ Confronted with the video projection, *LOVELAND*'s spectator is drawn into a distinctly durational experience in which time's passage is accompanied by the temporal flow of the musical score. The act of waiting is enforced at two distinct points in the video's projection: once upon initial sight of the ambiguous purple hue rising above the horizon and again when faced with the immensity of the smoke-filled screen. The video thus presents an event-oriented process – a linear experience with a beginning, middle and end. If the installation is apocalyptic, the viewer has neither the opportunity, nor the ability to suspend time or delay the end. This reading of the work is complicated, however, by the seamless looping of the video footage. Without any warning, the smoke disappears and the viewer is left again with the Arctic landscape – again evoking a nuclear winter – and then, gradually, it all begins again. The process is thus cyclical and implicitly endless.

In an adjoining chamber of the exhibition space, a crystal occupies a hexagonal wall vitrine, further contributing to the installation's endlessness. Peering through a small opening in the wall, the viewer is

63 Ross, p. 137.

64 Schütze, p. 00.04.11.

granted sight of the fluorescing emerald, illuminated in ultraviolet light and surrounded by mirrors that offer potentially infinite multiplication. Wilson argues that the crystal is historically “a mode of vision as much as a stone.”⁶⁵ In its earliest scientific use, crystals were used to study polarization, protraction and transformation of light, suggesting, “that there is more to seeing than meets the eye” and affording an image of the otherwise invisible.⁶⁶ The crystal is thus conceived as an intermediary object between the seen and the unseen – between the material world and the spiritual abyss – and implies the existence of a never-ending expanse beyond the conceptual capacity of human consciousness. In *LOVELAND*, the crystal is exhibited directly across from Shiel’s open book and together the two objects imbue the installation with insinuations of both apocalypse and enlightenment.

Apocalyptic imaginings never quite end with the destruction of the world. As Wilson exclaims, “ends are beginnings” and images of the world’s end are always accompanied by the belief in a return to the beginning.⁶⁷ This is likely why apocalyptic narratives, rather than wiping out the whole of humanity, tend to spare a survivor to potentially resurrect the race. *LOVELAND*’s spectator, as the sole human presence in the installation, arguably fills this role. Encompassed in the multi-sensorial environment that at once parodies the sanctity and sterility of the white cube and the sublime enormity of the Arctic expanse, the spectator is included and implicated in the unfolding events. Immersed in the ambient atmosphere of the installation, faced with a distant and unreachable horizon and confronted by a perpetually approaching purple cloud, the spectator is subsumed in a sublime simulation of an endless apocalypse.

65 Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice*, p. 15.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., p. 218.

If the end must also signal a beginning, this circularity is foregrounded in *LOVELAND* by both the remaining presence of the spectator after the event has occurred and the looping of the video footage. Remarking upon the prevalence of repetition in contemporary art, Groys cites the artist Francis Alÿs's assertion that today's non-teleological temporality effectively amounts to a mode of "rehearsal."⁶⁸ This conception is useful for an analysis of Stankieveh's installation when considered within the context of environmental instability and contentious ecological politics. Through the looping of the video footage, time is suspended, the future is delayed, and *LOVELAND*'s viewer is encompassed in a relentlessly enacted rehearsal of the end event: a repetitive cycle of rupture, Rapture and renewal; a revolution of apocalypse and origin.

Keywords

Charles Stankieveh, contemporary art, apocalypse, video, installation, the North, perception, politics of ecology, environmental concern, temporality

투고일: 2012. 3. 27 심사완료일: 2012. 4. 28 게재확정일: 2012. 5. 25

68 Groys, "Comrades of Time," p. 6.

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Arctic Exposure: *LOVELAND*'s Sublime Simulation of an Endless Apocalypse

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Charles Stankievec's 2011 installation *LOVELAND* includes a wall-sized screen depicting video footage of a barren arctic landscape in an enclosed room, painted and bathed in white light, that appears as an extension of the imaged environment. A melodic and industrial musical score emanates from multiple sound panels and as the music increases a cloud of purple smoke becomes visible on the horizon line in the distance and gradually advances toward the viewer until it completely fills the screen. The smoke then remains, rushing about madly and lapping at the border between the screen and the room before it suddenly subsides and the spectator is again left with the desolate landscape. The entire process takes a mere five minutes and then, fixed on an endless loop, begins again. This paper positions *LOVELAND* as an attempt to simulate a sublime experience of the end of the world through a transposition of the Arctic atmosphere into the gallery space. Encompassing a discussion of the historical and contemporary significance of the Arctic in popular culture, aesthetics and environmental politics, it is suggested that Stankievec employs an apocalyptic trope in reference to the unstable position of the North in the current political and ecological climate. Revisiting critiques of modernist exhibition practices and investigating the perceptual and temporal dimensions of the work, this analysis focuses primarily on the experience of the installation's spectator. Visually, aurally and phenomenologically immersed, the viewer is made subject to, and implicated in, the events unfolding on the screen and within the space. Due to the looping of the video footage, this paper argues that the apocalypse imaged in *LOVELAND* is presented as an endless event – incessantly enacted, yet infinitely deferred – and that the spectator is enveloped in an uncertain and unceasingly extended present moment.