



STATION

MICHAEL MCCORMACK



STATION

A response by

Genevieve Collins

Hheavy oil barrels hit the surface of the glacial arctic water. Military vessels, planes, and trucks leave materials for engineers to build dwelling structures and transmission towers, altering the landscape of the dark and frozen Canadian North. And then they sit in the unfamiliar atmosphere...in the silence...listening to the airwaves..., like alien scientists landed on a foreign planet.

This was the initiation of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) line, a series of American funded, Canadian operated radar stations constructed in the 1950s running from Alaska to Iceland. Galvanized by Cold War paranoia and

the fear of a joint air-raid and nuclear invasion, the stations aimed to detect Russian planes flying over the North Pole to attack North American cities - a militarized response to a paranoid state of fear with discernible contemporary parallels. The infrastructure took three years to build, but was only briefly employed before the technology became obsolete and the stations were mostly abandoned. Still germane today, however, are the environmental ramifications of the DEW line seeping copious amounts of oil, mercury and anti-freeze elements into the ground, as well as the socio-political consequences of occupying The North.

This is the historical frame of reference for Michael McCormack's exhibition *STATION*. The experiences of his grandfather, BW Cosman, a telecommunications engineer who worked on the construction and operation of the DEW line at a station near Alaska in the early 1950s, acts as a grounding point. His photographic archive is the impetus for McCormack's imagery—sculptural, pictorial and aural—of the installation, and conveys the environment and the experiences of DEW line operators.

Walking into *STATION*, the thinly dispersed works beckon you through the dimly lit gallery. Their lights offer refuge in the vast, uninhabited space. A sound—a radar signal—is broadcast throughout the gallery; it's true origin—the distorted heartbeat of the artist—is unrecognizable. It sets a governing pulse, regulating the dissemination of frequencies into the space. It periodically shifts from soothing hum to distressing alarm when the vociferous signal demands an acute response. One thinks of the radio operators who sat in the dark waiting to detect a foreign attack and perhaps, in their engrossed silence, listened to their own heartbeats. The combined effect of the lights and distorted sound, draws viewers in to the Cold War atmosphere—perhaps even subconsciously—before the tones and sources of light register as anything specific.





Two prints enlarged from 35mm slides taken by Cosman are displayed in a shadowy corner, further illustrating the isolation and solitude experienced by workers and contextualizing the environment the installation references. One captures men rowing oil barrels and supplies to shore from a military vessel visible in the distance, while the other shows an airplane taking off from the frozen tundra. The images highlight the vulnerability of DEW line workers and their dependence on logistics and technology being provided for them in order to survive.

Halved oil barrels arranged in a semi-circle facing the wall in the gallery recall the lightweight prefabricated Quonset huts that accompanied the construction of the DEW line while simultaneously referencing the environmental degradation caused by the project. They appear to be either



rising from the ground or seeping into the landscape, and are equipped with internal radio receivers and halogen lights that flicker with varying degrees of luminosity in response to the rhythmic broadcast. They sporadically light up the gallery wall, which becomes brighter in line with the volume and frequency of the broadcast. Viewers' bodies interfere with radio signals and cast shadows on the wall, implicating them in the effects of the DEW line and other ventures which occupy Northern space.

In the back corner of the gallery stands an eight-foot-tall Stevenson Screen, a structure of Norwegian design created to shelter meteorological instruments from severe weather conditions. Viewers are forced to alter their posture to find the source of light which flickers through narrow slats in the screen. In the ceiling of the structure is a monitor which rapidly rotates through a series of more photographs taken by Cosman during his time on the DEW



line, an accelerated slideshow calling to mind the frenetic cadence of Morse Code. It perhaps echoes the fragmented, non-linear, and at times inaccessible transmission of information between generations; McCormack encountered his grandfather's unwillingness to discuss the emotional aspects of his work, preferring to talk about more practical subjects involving the daily operation of the station and what food they ate.

Both the barrels and Stevenson Screen function as remote sources of light, evoking the cold expansiveness of the Arctic and seclusion of the Dew line operators. Collectively they emit a polyrhythmic light in the gallery that, when combined with the transmission, suggests a flurry of invisible radio activity driving a narrative.

Although the stations became obsolete within a decade, a more lasting consequence of the DEW line was its role in the colonization of the North. It brought stationary community existence to a previously nomadic hunting and fishing Inuit population and affected the migratory patterns of wildlife in the area. McCormack described images from the DEW line as providing "...context to the relationship between recorded media and intergenerational storytelling, but more broadly as a colonial tool of remote sensing (both distance and time) to claim ownership or entitlement to a distant place." This notion speaks to sovereignty and ownership of land through militarization and defense, and the erroneous colonial assumption that remote landscapes are uninhabited. McCormack recognized in his artist talk that his practice has, in turn, benefitted from the specific act of colonialism through this exhibition—a matter he clearly struggles with and identifies as important to acknowledge.¹ STATON acts as an important reminder of our colonial past in The North as much as it honors McCormack's memory of his grandfather, his spirit of adventure, and his work and experiences as a telecommunications engineer.

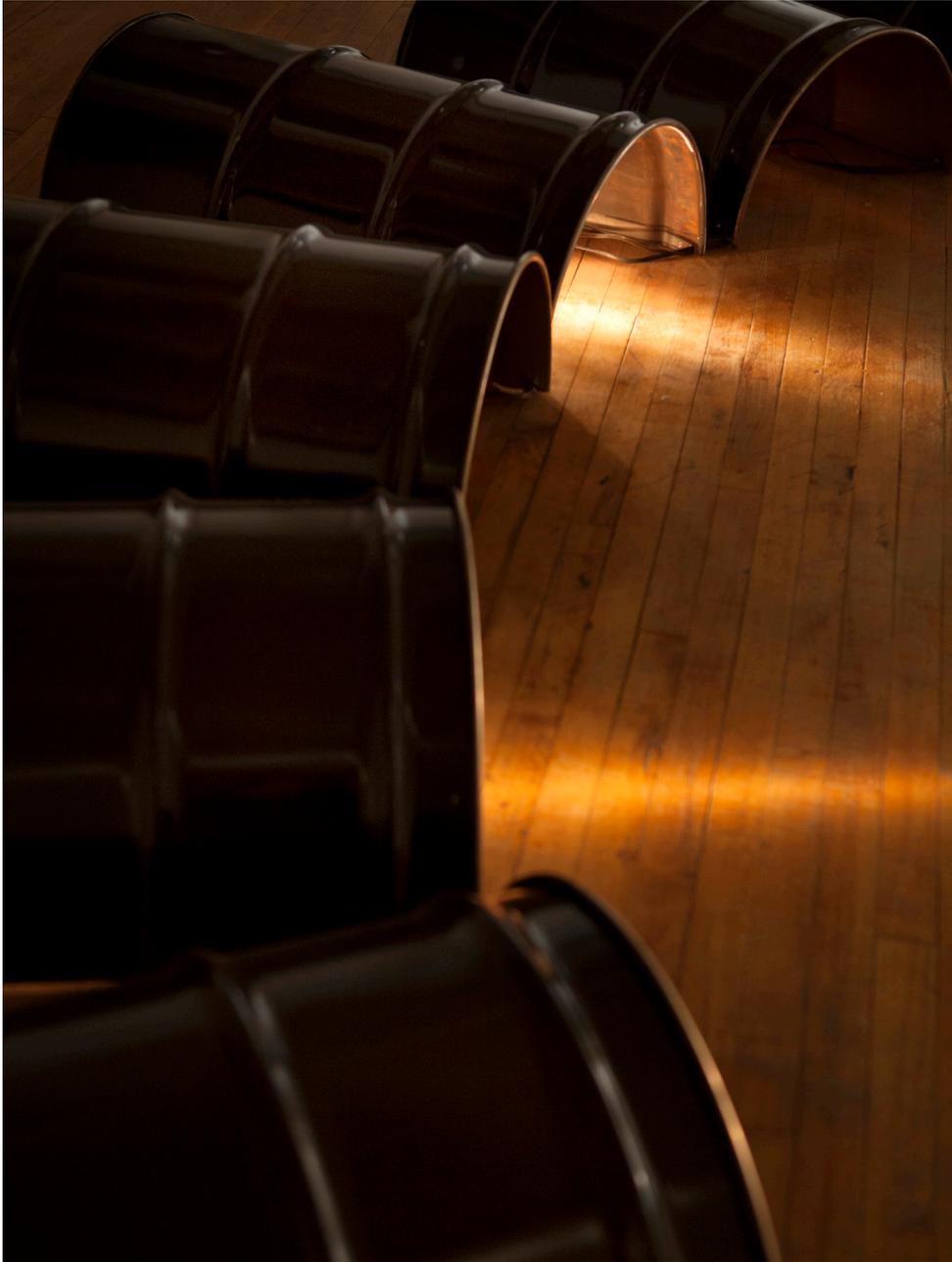
The DEW line was mostly closed down not ten years after it was initiated and the stations were left rapidly (coffee was left sitting in mugs), creating a post-apocalyptic aesthetic compounded by the inability of the American and Canadian governments to organize a successful clean-up in the decades following the dissolution of the project.² McCormack's exploration of lost modes of communication and the implications of forgotten data and abandoned signals—political as well as familial—asks what we stand to lose when information becomes impractical or impossible to interpret.

Wandering through the gallery, there is a veiled indication that something critical but inaccessible is occurring. Are the structures communicating or is one acting as a jamming signal for the other? Do they speak the same language or have their messages been mystified or forgotten through the temporality of communicative channels? The structures flicker away, but who is present and able to decipher the meaning of the data?

Special thanks to hannah_g for the opportunity, and to Michael McCormack for answering my questions.

Notes

- 1 Michael McCormack, *aceartinc.*, *STATION* Artist Talk Given at *aceartinc.*, 02/24/2017
- 2 The military cleaned-up a hand full of stations after the technologies employed on the DEW line became obsolete and resource shifted, but many were simply abandoned for decades. The government returned to the sites and attempted a proper clean-up in the 1990s, although there was contention between the Americans and Canadians over who should be organizing and carrying out the effort.



Critical Distance is a writing program of **aceartinc.** that encourages critical writing and dialogue about contemporary art. The program is an avenue for exploration by emerging and established artists and writers. Written for each exhibition mounted at **aceartinc.** these texts form the basis of our annual journal Paper Wait.

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Genevieve Collins is a writer, DJ, and arts administrator who has worked at a variety of arts organizations and artist-run centres in Winnipeg. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Development Sociology from Cornell University.

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