

An Other North: The Arctic Circle Summer Solstice Expedition 2017

Brett Despotovich, Robert Hengeveld, Risa Horowitz, Brandy Leary, Lynne Quarmby and Susan Stewart

Volume 43, Number 1, 2018

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050820ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050820ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)
1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Despotovich, B., Hengeveld, R., Horowitz, R., Leary, B., Quarmby, L. & Stewart, S. (2018). An Other North: The Arctic Circle Summer Solstice Expedition 2017. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 43(1), 53–62. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050820ar>

Article abstract

Cette section Pratiques présente un aperçu du travail de six Canadiens, cinq artistes et une scientifique, qui en juin 2017 ont navigué le long des côtes ouest et nord du Svalbard, dans l'Arctique, dans le cadre de *The Arctic Circle Summer Solstice Expedition*. Cette expédition réunissait trente artistes, scientifiques, architectes et éducateurs, dont les pratiques englobent le dessin, les médias photographiques, les interventions *in situ*, la vidéo, la danse, la performance, l'écriture, les démarches sociales et la biologie moléculaire.

Cette section témoigne de la nature interdisciplinaire, transdisciplinaire et multidisciplinaire des projets réalisés pendant l'expédition, ainsi que des multiples réflexions nées dans les mois suivants des discussions s'y étant déroulées. Encadrées par divers thèmes de projet, tels le deuil, la souveraineté, les catastrophes écologiques, les études nordiques et la cosmologie, les expériences collectives des participants, ainsi que les oeuvres qui en résultèrent, soulèvent des questions concernant les écologies humaines et leurs effets sur elles-mêmes et sur la planète entière.

An Other North: The Arctic Circle Summer Solstice Expedition 2017

Brett Despotovich, Robert Hengeveld, Risa Horowitz,
Brandy Leary, Lynne Quarmby, and Susan Stewart

Right now (February 2018) on Svalbard, an archipelago within the Arctic Circle, sea vessels prepare to sail as soon as the waters open. They are scheduling which fjords and glaciers they will visit, on which date, and during which timeframe. Such is the level of demand for so many ships, and the desire of so many voyagers to experience the feeling of solitude in the wilderness. At the same time, Longyearbyen—the largest town on Svalbard (approximately 2,500 people), and the northernmost civil settlement on the planet—is undergoing its eighty-seventh consecutive month of above average temperatures.¹ In June 2017, six Canadians joined a group of thirty artists, educators, scientists, and architects on the Arctic Circle Summer Solstice Expedition around the west and north coast of Svalbard. Organized and subsidized by The Arctic Circle, a branch of the New York-based, not-for-profit foundation The Farm Inc., the project runs summer and autumn expeditions for participants from around the world. Various state, provincial, private, and public funders sponsor most of the participants, while others finance this expensive venture through crowd funding. As described on The Arctic Circle website,

Artist and scientist led ... The Arctic Circle brings together international artists of all disciplines, scientists, architects, and educators who collectively explore remote and fascinating destinations aboard a specially outfitted Barquentine sailing vessel ... The Arctic Circle provides a shared experience for its participants to engage in myriad issues relevant to our time and to develop professionally through fieldwork and research, interdisciplinary collaborations, exhibition opportunities, and public and classroom engagement.²

Cette section Pratiques présente un aperçu du travail de six Canadiens, cinq artistes et une scientifique, qui en juin 2017 ont navigué le long des côtes ouest et nord du Svalbard, dans l'Arctique, dans le cadre de *The Arctic Circle Summer Solstice Expedition*. Cette expédition réunissait trente artistes, scientifiques, architectes et éducateurs, dont les pratiques englobent le dessin, les médias photographiques, les interventions *in situ*, la vidéo, la danse, la performance, l'écriture, les démarches sociales et la biologie moléculaire.

Cette section témoigne de la nature interdisciplinaire, transdisciplinaire et multidisciplinaire des projets réalisés pendant l'expédition, ainsi que des multiples réflexions nées dans les mois suivants des discussions s'y étant déroulées. Encadrées par divers thèmes de projet, tels le deuil, la souveraineté, les catastrophes écologiques, les études nordiques et la cosmologie, les expériences collectives des participants, ainsi que les œuvres qui en résultèrent, soulèvent des questions concernant les écologies humaines et leurs effets sur elles-mêmes et sur la planète entière.

We sailed on a vessel named the *Antigua*. Each participant was invited after a peer review of their individual, professional projects; they were chosen to conduct work based on their unique and sometimes shared personal backgrounds, life stages, and goals. The Canadian participants included Brett Despotovich, Robert Hengeveld, Risa Horowitz, Brandy Leary, Lynne Quarmby, and Susan Stewart, five artists and one scientist whose practices encompass drawing, photo-based media, site-specific intervention, video, dance, molecular biology, performance art, writing, and social practice, and whose works form the basis for this Practices section. This introduction expresses many of the thoughts that emerged from our conversations in the months following the residency. Framed by diverse project themes, such as mourning, northern studies, sovereignty, ecological disaster, and cosmology, the participants' collective experiences and resulting works raise questions regarding human ecologies and their impact on each other and on the planet Earth in the epoch now increasingly referred to as the Anthropocene.

The residency provided a nexus for diverse practices that encompassed disciplinary, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and cross-disciplinary individual and collaborative methodologies. Indeed, Robert Hengeveld argues that as information becomes increasingly accessible and traditional methodologies are decentralized interdisciplinary practices emerge as a natural by-product. For Lynne Quarmby—the scientist in our group—the most important lessons of the residency were learned from listening to artist participants discuss their experiences and responses to the environment. She sees this as a rich form of multidisciplinary engagement and wishes to increase her ability to embody interdisciplinarity in herself, a praxis that is taking shape in her collaborative work with Susan Stewart. Stewart, by contrast, describes her social-practice collaborations as transdisciplinary and works across multiple fields of inquiry.

Brett Despotovich sought exchange rather than collaboration, and he hoped to use the opportunity for personal development and meditation alongside like-minded shipmates. For Brandy Leary, who most often works collaboratively, the residency was conceived as a deep, solo journey focused on working with the body and the landscape enhanced by collaboration formed through conversation with fellow participants (conversation is understood here as a methodology and a way of creating knowledge). Risa Horowitz's main goals for the expedition were focused on tracking the midnight sun as an astronomical phenomenon at the planetary poles. The sun's refusal to appear through clouds and mist for most of the trip led her to depend upon the help of others, as she was forced to improvise on a daily basis.

Most on the ship were artists whose interests in the sciences are an inspirational anchor for their artistic efforts. Leary considers the connection between art and science to be poetic. While this connection holds many different ways of meaning making that evolve from different approaches, art and science are both capable of posing great questions. Stewart's grandfather was an artist and her father a scientist. For her, the two are never really separated. Similarly, Hengeveld argues that, in spite of methodological differences, the lines of such disciplinary divisions are much more ambiguous than our institutional perspectives acknowledge (or permit). Horowitz wonders if such disciplinary divisions are merely a matter of how challenging it must be for those who wish to become true polydidacts, given the briefness of a human life span. And Quarmby notes that though she arrived on the boat a scientist, the voyage was transformative: she now feels that she is, at least in a small way, emerging as an artist. She believes that, whereas science provides the tools for generating data, we can benefit from understanding that data through metaphor and emotion, which belong to the realm of art. To this end, Quarmby has begun to write a memoir of our journey

1. "Svalbard is the warmest place in Norway today, the North Pole is above freezing and scientists are freaking out," icepeople.net, February 27, 2018, <http://icepeople.net/2018/02/27/svalbard-is-the-warmest-place-in-norway-today-the-north-pole-is-above-freezing-and-scientists-are-freaking-out> (accessed March 21, 2018).

2. "Program," The Arctic Circle, <http://theartcticcircle.org/program> (accessed February 28, 2018).

on the Antigua, which is woven with anecdotes about cell biology and her development as a climate activist, as well as stories about her family history in the North.

Two main themes recurred during the expedition: the idea of adventure and the contradictions generated by the huge carbon footprint our participation in the expedition accrued. Stewart acknowledges her carbon debt load, which she feels she needs to repay through social work, while Quarmby struggles with the feeling that she fooled herself into believing her work could ever justify the carbon produced on the trip. However, both feel renewed potential. Months have passed since our return home, and new work emerges through continued collaboration, the aim of which is now to further conversations about climate change and environmental awareness. Hengeveld's first-hand experience has given him a deeper understanding and appreciation of the complexities of the North. While it came at a cost, he now disseminates and shares this understanding through his creative practice.

For Horowitz, visiting moraine after moraine, glacier after glacier, fjord after fjord, day in and day out, became an overwhelmingly complicated adventure mixed with a sense of creative immobilization: after all, everybody was taking mostly the same pictures of the same majestic landscapes. The Arctic is a place where one can spin in circles, like in a game of Pin the Tail on the Donkey, only to be presented with yet another stunningly beautiful vista. However, simmering the experience down to an idea of adventure undermines the fundamental safety from which we, as participants, all benefited. As Quarmby points out, we were cared for by a competent crew and guides—the latter were, ostensibly, on polar bear watch more than guiding per se—and fed three meals a day on a ship outfitted with warm cabins and hot showers. Furthermore, Hengeveld aptly argues that to see this expedition through the lens of adventure emphasizes a spirit of thrill seeking over

the careful investigation, reflection, and consideration he experienced in the work and research of those around him. That said, the expedition was a form of eco-tourism, during which each participant felt an earnest sense of the need for conservation and better stewardship of the planet, despite dieseling around the Greenland Sea and Arctic Ocean watching for polar bears and visiting environments where the impacts of human exploitation were often obvious (for example, the bags full of beached litter we collected from our landing points). But then again, Despotovich recognizes that artists are skilled at excusing the details of their practices that contradict the ecologically conscious values they hold. For all of us who participated in the June 2017 Arctic Circle Summer Solstice Expedition, the journey continues to raise questions about the ways in which our complicity rubs up against our best intentions.

Svalbard is a non-state—an international territory governed by treaty and administered by Norway. It is a place that has no historical Indigenous population, a fact that framed the expedition uniquely for our group, as it occurred during Canada 150 and in the months following the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its Calls to Action.³ The colonial problematics of Canada 150 had a particular resonance for Leary, who developed a deeper understanding of them during the trip, while Quarmby admits she was keen to be out of Canada during part of that year, as she was ashamed and angry that Canada continues to fail Indigenous communities. For Hengeveld, notions of land ownership, borders, and the naming of sites have been long-held interests, and he expressed this through the work he conducted during our voyage. Horowitz, for her part, is strained with questions surrounding her desire to go to an other North, rather than the deeply conflicted Canadian North—a North where she could hope to feel a temporary relief from her status as a settler. She grapples with her own complicity and obliga-

3. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (Winnipeg: Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015), www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf (accessed March 26, 2018).

tions in response to the TRC recommendations and life in Canada during this transformational epoch in its history.

The residency was deeply life changing for most aboard, be it for the emerging artist attending his first major residency (Despotovich), or for the senior artist affected at the deepest levels by bliss, grief, determination, and knowledge (Stewart). Operating across disciplines, genres, and subject-positions, this journey raised countless debates and questions in complex discourse that will take shape over time as we individually and collectively process our experiences. ¶

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS Robert Hengeveld, Risa Horowitz, and Brandy Leary acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts. Risa Horowitz further acknowledges the support of the Saskatchewan Arts Board. Lynne Quarmby would like to thank Mr. Rudy North for sponsoring her participation in the residency.

Lynne Quarmby



Lynne Quarmby, *14th of July Glacier*, 2017.

MEMOIR EXCERPT I am here in Svalbard to study snow algae. I am also here to collaborate with others on finding new ways of inspiring appropriately urgent action on climate change. There is a third reason I am here, and I wonder if it might be the most important one. I am here because, in the past, I have found solace in the wilderness and because I've always been drawn to stories of the North. My great-grandfather disappeared into the wilderness of Great Bear Lake in the winter of 1932. The diary of the resourceful and independent sixty-seven-year-old reveals that some illness—a bad cold or perhaps the flu—kept him trapped too long in his trapper's cabin. Winter arrived, together with hunger, loneliness, and depression. In an act of desperation, he set off to hike out and was never seen again. My great-grandfather did not find his way out of that cold dark Arctic winter. Eighty-five years later, I find myself in a too-warm Arctic summer, searching for a way through the haunting darkness of our times. ¶

Lynne Quarmby is a Canadian scientist, activist, politician, and emerging popular science writer. She is a professor in the Department of Molecular Biology and Biochemistry at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia. —quarmby@sfu.ca



Brett Despotovich, *still_20.06.2017_18:41:41_3m01s/12m06s*, video still. Courtesy of the artist.

Brett Despotovich

As the Arctic Circle Residency approached, I abandoned my best laid schemes. The context for my engagement became clearer, and it no longer felt appropriate to ask questions as an artist. Instead, I should listen to the demands of the experience, the environment, and those travelling with me. Many, if not all of us, had a laptop or a smart phone on hand, despite being far from any Wi-Fi or mobile service. I was interested in this anapoptism, which underscored just how out of place these tools are in that environment, so I chose to use my impotent and dying iPhone as my primary means of capturing images. Slow-motion video echoed the pace of time under the midnight sun of Svalbard, and the phone's limited storage capacity while away on landings (around 40 minutes) offered a challenge not often associated with that technology. These videos were shot by holding each composition for a period of time, thus allowing the elements of each to shift within them. The image included here is part of a larger body of work that consists of four sets of grids of these videos, a configuration that is intended to emphasize the latent undulations that pass between the frames. ¶

Brett Despotovich is a multidisciplinary visual and sound artist.
 —studio@despotovich.com | www.despotovich.com

Robert Hengeveld

MINE One doesn't have to search far to uncover traces of another's presence. At times, these marks are the result of inadvertent action; at others, they represent something more calculated—a bathroom scrawling or a name etched into concrete. Whether intentional or not, all markings acknowledge their maker. The firebrand, like the surveyor's stake or chain-link fence, is both a specific form of mark making and a declarative gesture of ownership. The project *MINE* was an ice-branding exercise that responded to the notion of land ownership and the present jostling for sovereignty in the North. It was one of several investigations I undertook during an expedition to the Arctic alongside an international group of artists, architects, and scientists. This project consisted of a text-based firebrand, heated by torch and seared into the ice. The exercise of branding was carried out collectively along with other participants on the expedition, effectively placing an international, albeit temporal claim to the landscape. In an unanticipated, yet poetic end to this collective action, the aluminum firebrand overheated and subsequently melted. This sealed a rather abrupt and final conclusion to the project early in the expedition. As shipmate Lucy Humphries aptly quipped, "The Arctic doesn't do requests." ¶

Robert Hengeveld is Assistant Professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Grenfell Campus. He is an installation and media artist whose work explores the boundaries between reality and fiction, and where we find ourselves within that relationship.

—info@roberthengeveld.com | roberthengeveld.com



Robert Hengeveld, *MINE, branding*, 2017. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Risa Horowitz, untitled digital photograph, 2017.

Risa Horowitz

I MELT GLACIERS I thought a lot about the excess of our expedition and my privilege as a white-looking Western artist with a university job and the pleasure to travel. I thought a lot about leaving the country during Canada 150. I admit to needing to feel the relief of not being a settler in Canada at that time.

People were never displaced on Svalbard. The exploitation of natural resources, however, is extensive: first through whaling and trapping, then coal mining, and now through tourism.

And then there are the glaciers and sea ice.

I used a magnifying glass to try to melt a glacier.

The cosmos is unbearably profound ... unimaginably vast, incomprehensible in its scope ... and outside the reach of human trauma and drama. ¶

Risa Horowitz is Associate Professor at the University of Regina. She is a visual and media artist whose works explore the relations between expert and amateur, work and hobby, and leisure and productivity through photo-based media, video, performance, electronics, installation, and writing.

—Risa.Horowitz@uregina.ca | www.risahorowitz.com

Brandy Leary

MELTING, MOURNING, AND A SERIES OF IMPOSSIBLE TASKS
My artistic practice explores entanglements of bodies, landscapes, and power. I investigate processes of colonial contact/settlement, climate disruption, economic exploitation, and the attempted genocide of Indigenous peoples as interrelated actions that have reshaped who we are and how we live. I also examine the embodied impact of ecological decline through geologic, geographic, human, and historical processes to create choreographic works of diverse scopes and scales.

Currently I am working with the concept of “Great Grief” put forward by Norwegian eco-scientist Per Epsen Stoknes, whose work emphasizes the paradoxical experience of living with disappearance and knowing that we ourselves are part of this process. In this period of disappearing and melting, I am curious about the ways we are collectively mourning and reconciling our histories with the paths that brought us here. This body of work examines suspension—of time and body through altered relationships to verticalness and landscape. *Suspended* is a photo derived from a video work examining the suspension of time in the Arctic both historically and as many narratives unravel and expand. As an image, it represents a performance, while also serving as a record and artefact of offering, research, and listening with the Arctic landscape. ¶

Brandy Leary is Artistic Director of Anandam Dancetheatre. She creates contemporary performances through the body with an artistic practice informed by ance, martial arts, ritual, circus, and theatre.
—anandamdance@gmail.com | www.anandam.ca



Brandy Leary, *Suspended*, 2017. Photo courtesy Justin Levesque.

Susan Stewart

SOCIAL PRACTICE AND THE SCIENCE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Daily land and ice excursions were precious opportunities to reflect. One day, the group lingered amid melting snow, runoff, scree, and crumbling caverns of ice at the edge of a retreating glacier. The mountains we contemplated and photographed, and the rock we traversed, had been covered in ice for thousands of years. We were among the first humans to witness what lay beneath and it felt terribly wrong.

The fierce, raw beauty of the Arctic was coupled with our knowledge of the devastating impact human culture is having on this precious and unique ecosystem. This trip brought a visceral understanding of what the planet stands to lose as climate change intensifies: a vast, largely untampered wilderness that is fragile and vulnerable and has been home to multiple life forms for millennia.

I am motivated to share this experience and inspire others to take deeper action on climate change. In one project, a public presentation located at the nexus of art and science, I screen images that represent a direct experience of ground zero, while Lynne Quarmby presents essential data. Dialogue with audiences on the immediate impact of climate change allows us to consciously embrace this reality, thus opening the door for genuine social and cultural change. ¶

Susan Stewart is Associate professor at the Emily Carr University of Art + Design. She is a media artist, photographer, and educator whose works use video, photography, writing, and multi-media performances and installations to explore the relational, ecological, and political aspects of the social body.
—sstewart@ecuad.ca



Susan Stewart, *Glacier Edge*, 2017. Photo courtesy of the artist.