

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Dispatches from the Montréal Biennial: Arctic Perspective Initiative



2K+

Without some explanation, the myriad objects on view created by artist duo Arctic Perspective Initiative might seem like props from a science fiction movie. However, the complicated field tools — which include an early drone used to create high procedure maps; a waterproof device built for recording sound; a traditional Qammutik sled dwelling nicknamed Kallitaq (which means “Thunder and Lightning” in Inuktitut); and a document called the “Phoenix Declaration” — are all real pieces of equipment that Matthew Biederman and Marko Peljhan use for their projects in the Arctic. Defining API as a transnational art, science, and culture working group, Biederman and Peljhan have embarked on several projects over the past six years in collaboration with Arctic Indigenous populations. We sat down with the pair to discuss the Arctic Treaty, caribou recipes, and the explorer/exploiter paradigm.

When did you become artists? Did you study cartography, technology, other things first?

Matthew Biederman: I studied time-based art and got a bachelors and a masters in Montréal. I think being an artist means becoming an expert in everything else. It’s been very organic. I get interested in something and it’s like, “Oh well I need to learn how to use a computer and write software. Or I need to become an expert in light bulbs or whatever.” You have to become an expert very quickly and move on.

When did your engagement with the Arctic begin?

MP: We started an initiative called the Interpolar Transnational Art Science Constellation called I-TASC during the International Polar Year and there were other colleagues involved in that.

MB: There was always a hope that this Macrolab would go to Antarctica. This is how I-TASC came about. As we did more and more research about the Arctic and Antarctica we just became so enthralled. There is this culture there that couldn't be ignored, but you have to scratch a little bit under the surface to find it — and that's what we did.

What is the International Polar Year?

MP: International Polar Year happened from 2007 to 2009. It's called a year, but it lasted three. Scientists, you know. It was a continuation of the International Geophysical Year. The International Geophysical Year happened in 1957. To celebrate the year, the Soviets launched the first artificial satellite, the Sputnik. This is not a very well known fact — it was part of the International Geophysical Year celebrations. And the US and the Soviets — of course, it was the height of the Cold War — both established permanent bases in the Antarctic in the name of peace and so on. In the Arctic, they were chasing each other with submarines under the ice so the Arctic was always kind of a zone of conflict with a disregard for local cultures and populations. Whereas in the Antarctic, because there was no native population except for other inhabitants of this planet besides humans, they decided to work peacefully together there. It's interesting because it turned into this Antarctic Treaty later which, was signed in 1961, and specifically prohibits any kind of military or economical exploitation of the continent.

MB: In an obvious way.

MP: We have a continent on this planet that is not a nation state so that's really interesting because most of the conflicts we have are because of nation states. All the land claims were frozen with the Antarctic Treaty, but of course because a Norwegian explorer went down in the beginning of the century, suddenly Norway claims a huge part of Antarctica. South Americans have their own land claims. Because Americans went down, they claim. Australians too of course. And of course the British — why not — because they dominated the seas until they didn't.

Marko Peljhan: I went to classical theater radio academy in Slovenia. I studied Shakespeare and that helped, but as soon as I ended my studies I decided to leave the so-called Italian box of theater and move into different types of spaces with my performative work. I still do performance, but everything becomes a performance. Everything where there's human engagement is also a symbolic act in many ways. It has performative qualities.

When did you come together to do API?

MP: API officially started in 2008, but we've been working together on the idea of engaging the earth's poles for a longer time.

MB: Marco had a project called the Macrolab. It was essentially autonomous architecture that could move from place to place. It would be stationed in different remote areas around the world. What he did was bring scientists and artists to work together in a situation where you were in a remote location to submit proposals and do projects in three areas.

MP: Communications, Migrations, and Weather and climate.

MB: I submitted a proposal that was about the electromagnetic spectrum. We met there.

MP: Historically what brought us both together was radio. Matthew and myself are amateur radio people. If you want to get a lineage of our expertise, it's radio. I was 11 years old and built all kinds of stuff and talked to people all over the world on my radio. It's a beautiful kind of knowledge to have.

MB: It's a natural resource.

MP: That's what brought us together. If we get bored, we can still talk about radio.

MB: We got to know each other and came to understand that we have a very common view on the world and art-making and went on to do some performative projects together that really dealt with the electromagnetic spectrum and the politics therein. We still do these projects in fact that have to do with cryptology, the spectrum, politics, and President Eisenhower — a whole different area of expertise.