

NOTES:

1. Kenn Harper, *Give Me My Father's Body: The Life of Minik, The New York Eskimo*. Hanover, NH: Steerwater Press, 2000: 3.
2. Wikipedia. Nunavut, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nunavut> accessed May 2012.
3. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin discuss remediation in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Massachusetts: MIT Press 2000: 41-42. "Finally, the new medium can remediate by trying to absorb the older medium entirely, so that the discontinuities between the two are minimized. The very act of remediation, however, ensures that the older medium cannot be entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways."
4. Artist statement
5. Artist statement
6. Marshall McLuhan in "Myth and Mass Media" *Daedalus*, Vol. 88, No. 2, (Spring, 1959): 340.
7. David Bouchard, in conversation with the author
8. Bolter and Grusin, 47.
9. Accessed at <http://northernwaterways.com/news/?p=1939>, May 2012.
10. Glenn Gould in the documentary introduction of "The Idea of North", quote accessed at <http://www.hermitary.com/solitude/gould.html>, May 2012.

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CONSTRUCTED LAND

David Bouchard, Alex Geddie, Bruno Lessard & Pierre Tremblay

May 25 to June 30, 2012

RECONSTRUCTIONS AND DIGITAL LANDSCAPES

BY STEVEN LOFT

There is a story among the Inuit that when the first white explorers arrived in the far north the local inhabitants described "a whole island of wood which moved along the sea on wings, and in the depths had many houses and rooms full of noisy people. Little boats hung along the rail, and these, filled with men, were lowered on the water, and as they surrounded the ship it looked as if the monster gave birth to living young."¹ Thus would begin the fascination for the "North" that captivates us still. And it is this sense of wonder, of enchantment and intrigue that inspired artists David Bouchard, Bruno Lessard, Pierre Tremblay and audio composer Alex Geddie to consider the north in their large multimedia project, *Constructed Land*.

There is a webcam and a website, hosted by kimmirutweather.com, that records the weather in Kimmirut, Nunavut via continuous weather reports. It runs 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Kimmirut is a small community in Nunavut, Canada's newest "Territory". Nunavut (meaning "our land" in the Inuktitut language) has been home to Inuit for millennia and became the largest and newest federal territory of Canada on April 1, 1999. It is a site and a space of profound

beauty and extremes of climate. It is part of the federation we know as Canada, but it is also separate, remote, and sparsely populated as well as being "home to the northernmost permanently inhabited place in the world."² While it is the customary and traditional territory of the Inuit, it is also the frontier of resource extraction, national "sovereignty" and colonial encroachment. It is, indeed, a land of ancient tradition and modern settler politics in an often uneasy and contentious relationship.

The website records a still image of a small part of the community showing a few houses, a road, a light pole and the edge of a lake. In the distance, small mountains can be seen. The website also relates text-based weather information corresponding with the day and time of the images. The Kimmirut scene recorded is a constant one, the passage of time marked only through changes in light, weather conditions, landscape and shadows of human activity. Nothing remarkable at first glance but when one witnesses the dramatic changes of this landscape over the months, a fascinating and wondrous picture emerges. By using those images, and remediating³ them through digital manipulation, the artists

have created time-based installations and two-dimensional representations that evoke notions of solitude and encroachment, the fragility of “settlement” and the powerful forces of nature.

Bouchard, Lessard and Tremblay (Alex Geddie joined the collective in 2011) came across the website in 2010 and found the images so compelling they began to create a database of them. They began capturing the images via the internet on June 21, (the longest day of the year). This data was then collected/recorded every fifteen minutes, twenty-four hours a day. As of April 2012, the archive contained almost 60,000 images,⁴ and the artists began formulating ways in which to process the vast amounts of data images into aesthetic representations of this ‘foreign’ and remote geography. The result is *Constructed Land*, an exhibition and multi-format (multi-channel video, interactive projections, and sound) project which proposes various experiences through engagement with the database.

The artists have assembled and recombined this vast array of images as new visual compositions representing different facets of Kimmirut on the edges of our imagination. The “North” as a place and a space of wonder is evident throughout (although to the citizens of Kimmirut it must seem ordinary and banal), but for us, it is transformed, reimagined, and presented anew by each digital process the artists employ. The works in *Constructed Land* thus exist as intelligent artifact, a memory device of perception and myth. Through the multiplicity of this constant, yet changing image, the viewer is given a narrow frame, yet enormously vast perspective on this remote landscape, while at the same time being exposed to a variety of ways of seeing.

For Bouchard, Geddie, Lessard and Tremblay, it is not just the geography that is to be explored, but also the means by which the images were acquired. The work also investigates “the role of the webcam as an unbiased and unrelenting image collector, unimpeded by aesthetic judgment, as well as the use of natural data to define structure in time-based media.”⁵ The artists’ use of multi-faceted repetition and digital re-construction constitute a mediated imagining of ‘The North’ that is both singular, and mythic. Marshall McLuhan writes:

when such a new codification has reached the technological stage of communicability and repeatability, has it not, like a spoken tongue, also become a macromyth? How much compression of the elements of a process must occur before one can say that they are certainly in mythic form?⁶

In one of the works in the exhibition, thirty-six television sets of varying sizes and vintages are arranged in a sculptural formation (a pseudo-mountain dominating one wall of the exhibition space) displaying three 12-channel videos. Artist Pierre Tremblay has viewed every image of the vast database and coalesced them into “months”. Thus three sets of the annual progression play simultaneously, creating an ever changing, yet consistent landscape, flowing across the installation’s many screens, eventually breaking up through multiplied reduction into abstract geometries of light and form.

In two other works, David Bouchard has created user manipulated (controlled, generated) tableaux of fractured space; stretching time as the images split into segments. Each line segment is a discrete image from the database incorporated into in a grid, forming an ever changing and dynamic representation of space and time.

This shifting perspective (controlled by the viewer), is based on changes to the speed and “length” of each segment offering slices of time, alternating between static representation and abstracted textures of light, shadow and image... an “imaginary territory”, as artist David Bouchard has termed it, all still based on the same time-lapsed imagery.⁷ Control of the time/speed as well as the size and brilliance of the segments, creates temporal spaces which cannot be saved, nor likely repeated: a distinct, yet fleeting and temporal view of Kimmirut.

The continuity of imagery in all the works acts as a channel of communication, a conduit to the remoteness of Kimmirut. The artists bridge this conceptual and physical gap by creating complex information systems woven into the fabric of place and time, of past and present. It is a sublimation of time encapsulating concepts of home, landscape and climate through the bridge of electronic communication. Like messages sent to or from space, the originating images gives a glimpse, a snapshot to be interpreted and translated through the eyes and lens of the artist and then the viewer.

By manifesting a database in the language of visual culture, the artists redefine the intent, and the impact, of the original website. More than mere flotsam and jetsam of cyberspace, these “found (digital) objects” are the ephemera of the electronic ether, and which the artists use to create a repository of visual memory, an “open access” medium. Bolter and Grusin referred to this process as the “logic of hypermediacy”:

the artist (or multimedia programmer or web designer) strives to make the viewer acknowledge the medium as a medium and to delight in that acknowledgment. She does so by multiplying spaces and media and by repeatedly redefining the visual and conceptual relationships among mediated

spaces—relationships that may range from simple juxtaposition to complete absorption.⁸

Bouchard, Geddie, Lessard and Tremblay have built a mediated “window” on ‘The North’, one which compresses and expands time. A narrow window, to be sure, on such a vast and almost incomprehensible “movement” of day/night, of shifting seasons and glimpses (echoes) of human activity give the works a cinematic quality... an ethereal experience.

On December 28, 1967, the CBC Radio program “Ideas” broadcast an hour-long documentary by Glenn Gould called, “The Idea of North.” In the first of what would become his *Solitude Trilogy* these radio documentaries allowed Gould to explore ideas of solitude and isolation, subjects that had long fascinated him.⁹ In the introduction Gould explains:

I’ve been intrigued for quite a long time ... by that incredible tapestry of tundra and taiga country. I’ve read about it, written about it occasionally, and even pulled my parka on once and gone there. I’ve remained of necessity an outsider, and the north has remained for me a convenient place to dream about, spin tales about sometimes, and, in the end, avoid.¹⁰

Bouchard, Geddie, Lessard and Tremblay are on that same fascinating “virtual” journey, coalescing the steams of images from the remote wilderness into beautiful elegies of a place that they, and we, may never experience any other way.