

GALLERY TPW

Audibility

Listening: land-language-dreams

Scott Benesiinaabandan and Kite in conversation

Audibility is a three part, year long, online speaker series that explores language, sound and music. Using the thematics found in Jesse Chun's exhibition *And verse* (혼잣말의 언어 그리고 *cosmos*) as a starting point, Casey Mecija, Simon Fuh, and Scott Benesiinaabandan + Kite, present audio, research, and ideas that transgress notions of listening and hearing.

For the third and final program, **Scott Benesiinaabandan** interviews artist, musician, performer and scholar, **Kite**. Throughout their exploratory conversation Kite shares insight into her visual and musical practice, while the two touch on the differences between listening in the physical versus the dream world, the translation of language and dreams, the etymology and spiritual underpinning of words in Anishnaabemowin and Lakota, memoirs, and the relationship between land and language. Perhaps Scott sums up the interview best when he says: "sound really ties us to the human experience."

Curated by Heather Canlas Rigg

Click **here** for full details.

Below is an edited transcript of Scott and Kite's conversation - the full audio version is available at: gallerytpw.ca/audibility

SCOTT

Boozhoo, Benesii ndishnikaaz. Ma'iingan ndoodem. Obishkikokaang ndonjii.

Hi, my name is Scott Benesiinaabandan. I'm of the wolf clan and originally from Lac Seul First Nations in northern Ontario. I currently reside in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

KITE

My name is Suzanne Kite, I make art under my last name Kite. I am an artist and a composer, and sometimes academic.

I live in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I spend a lot of my time thinking about listening without the ears, and a lot of time thinking about the role of dreams and visions, and listening beyond the physical realm in order to create new things like new knowledge and new artworks.

SCOTT

When I was asked to do this *Audibility* project, I immediately thought about your work at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC) in Montréal, with your 3D generated prints, and the sonic, the audio work? Could you talk a little bit about the relationship between the audio, the sonic with the geo-located sculptural pieces?

KITE

Yeah, so that piece is United States Geologic Service (USGS) data, imported into a program and exported as screenshots, which became screenprints. Then it also became 3D models, which [were] sculpted to seem like the room at the MAC was intersecting with these landforms. The landforms were *Makǎ́ Oníya*, which is the Wind Cave that the Lakota people emerged out of, or were tricked out of, onto the earth, by Utomi, the spider. I've spent a lot of time thinking about maps, mapping and geologic data, which has been used and is used to oppress Indigenous communities, take our land, and turn it into resources.

I approached this piece with a sonification technique where I used data that transforms over and over into visible artworks, but simultaneously, it was realized as a score, as a visual score by the musician Eyvind Kang, on viola, and so...for that point we've passed through sonification, the data has transformed into visual visualization. And then the visual is being sonified. So it's like stacking abstraction on abstractions, have representations of interpretations of data, in order to probably get closer to the meaning of the thing in the first place, because the USGS doesn't capture the reality of *Makǎ́ Oníya*.

SCOTT

The complexity of the translation and re-translation and re-re-translation process sort of amplifies the cultural texture of the landscape that doesn't get brought out by...

KITE

No, not necessarily in this case because, you know, Eyvind isn't Lakota. We're not trying to represent the culture of the place. I think I'm just trying to translate it [...] in the gallery the title is *Makǎ́ Oníya intersects the MAC* and I wanted it to feel like—with the color of the carbon fiber, and there were other smaller pieces that were installed—I wanted it to look like there was an infection in the building of the MAC, and the infection was spreading in certain areas, in the vestibule, the entrance vestibule. I wanted the sound to kind of reflect the penetration of this data, into the space and so it

almost has nothing to do with *Makǎ́ Oníya* itself, but everything to do with feeling like I don't belong in the MAC. And feeling like the music is only haunting the MAC [during] the day...it's more like an emotional approach to being invited to put a sculpture in the MAC.

SCOTT

When I first encountered those pieces at the MAC, I was thinking right away about...I don't know if it was in the first movie, but I mean, the X Files introduced the old virus that was sort of trapped in the ice sheets, and it came out. I always thought about, like, those pieces sort of emerging into these colonial spaces, but sort of like that infection. And that process of, basically, a virus colonizing a space. But it's sort of representing that colonization process.

KITE

Yeah. I think we've talked a lot about cyberspace previously, and I think this is my approach to contemplating cyberspace and the distance from homeland. And so it's like I can experience this home, the place where they'll "emerge on the internet in this data." But it's so warped by the time I see it in the 3D program, and it's so warped by the time I see the map of it from Google Maps. There's something sick about it, like when you try to capture land into data form. It's like an infection, there's something unwell about it. There's something unwell about the desire to do that in the first place.

SCOTT

Does it have things to do with land sort of always in motion, and then sort of codifying it and stealing it in a way that's sort of unnatural?

KITE

Yeah, I think possession is a part of it. Like, we would never think to possess. I don't know, I feel like there's a reason that the Lakota people didn't live permanently in our sacred sites. You know, they're not for living or possessing. I think that says a lot about relationships with location. I think the other thing about *Makǎ́ Oníya* is it's the sound of it that defines it. It's this breathing sound that emerges from the earth that implies our history with the place and brings this mythological story to the present. It's not a mythology in the western definition. You can go hear it now and know the creation story.

SCOTT

Have you been to the site...have you heard it?

KITE

I haven't. I haven't been actually.

SCOTT

Is it accessible to just the public?

KITE

Yes, it's a National Park

SCOTT

I guess you're planning on visiting at some point?

KITE

Yeah, the problem is when I go to South Dakota, I want to spend all my time with my family. And so I never do any tourist stuff. I'd rather sit around and eat with them and go to events [laughs] that they want to go to.

SCOTT

Absolutely. I'm just thinking about your work. Like, oftentimes we talk about the technical side of things. I'm very familiar with your...I am not sure what you call it, the hair-braid performative piece with the gyroscopes and all those things. And then get lost in the technical stuff, which I really appreciate. But also, I'm really curious about your relationship with hearing, you know, like, what is that sort of process for you as an artist and for you as a Lakota woman? Like when you go to your territory, and you listen, I feel like listening and hearing are part of your re-migration back to your community, the original community? Could you reflect a little bit on the importance of hearing and listening to that process?

KITE

Yeah, so...I think there's an emphasis on listening in Lakota culture, listening to elders, listening to people with more experience than you, there's - you know, when I'm with family, they're the expert. They have all the knowledge and what's amazing to me is that no matter what we're talking about, their expertise is extreme. To the point that I don't really need to talk like...I have no need to talk. You know, why would I talk over them?

And so, in the process of going back over the years...I've become very used to listening in one area. And this is the area around where my great grandmother's house was, and all of her family members, all the extended family members in that family [the ###] they all live, more or less, in that radius. There's a hill that I go on and [to] record because there's horses nearby, there's birds, I mean, it's a really lush prairie landscape. There's the dam right there. And basically what you would consider an estuary — I'm not really sure the definition of an estuary— but like a really dense bird population in

the reeds there. So there's a lot to listen to. Robbie Wing and I made recordings this year, during the summer at dawn and dusk. And they're loud. They're very rich. And yeah, there's a lot to hear, and you know, there's dogs. Dog's are really loud. The kids are really loud. So that's just one part of the hearing. There's the audible in the physical world. And that's extremely important, but more important to me, has been learning about hearing in the spirit world. So, I have a lot of stories that have been shared with me about this. My great aunt, Mary Blackbird, shared with me a story where she could hear, I think it was our maybe four[th] great grandfather, maybe...seven generations before me –and that'd be like, five great grandfather's– and she could hear him praying. And that story has been very important to me lately, because she could hear him praying for the seventh generation, which is me and my cousins, and —she doesn't describe it as being a different form of hearing, it was a powerful experience where she could first hear the wind coming through the house, and then she could feel the wind in her hair, and then she was on the hill, hearing him pray, and it seems like it was an extremely audible experience to her.

Yeah, so those are...they're different kinds of hearing, but they're all in the same place. So how different can they be?

SCOTT

People have all sorts of different ways [that] they dream,...the contents of the dream and sort their sensibilities within their dream. For instance, some people don't hear anything in dreams, some people don't see colour in dreams. Do you have a way that you listen in dreams? Or do you hear sounds in dreams? Or is there any obvious sort of audible interaction in that world?

KITE

So my dreams seem to be kind of like psychic-communication-style, where I know what everyone's saying to me if they're talking to me, but I don't see their mouths move or any detail.

It seems unnecessary to hear exactly what's going on. But I have had a few times where I clearly heard music, where I was dreaming in music, where music is kind of like a language that I had been, like, if I had been spending a lot of time writing music, or listening to certain styles of music, I can then hear the full orchestral arrangement or something. I'm not a very practiced orchestral arranger. But I have played in about a billion orchestras in my life, it feels like. So sometimes my brain will just start producing things, but I can't remember, necessarily, what I heard.

SCOTT

Are we talking like muscle memory in terms of seeing yourself playing certain pieces, or is it more like, conceptually, you could add to that composition, or...

KITE

From what I recall, sometimes it's about playing violin and the notes are just forming. I consider music plain language-making because ... it's very difficult to form new words and form violin words. At the same time, it seems to use the same part of the brain, or at least [the] same part of my brain. But I've also felt like I was composing inside the dream and all the parts were forming underneath it. It does feel like language, it feels like you could almost form it in your mouth.

SCOTT

That materiality of dreams that come to translate themselves to the external world... I'm just thinking about when you talk about feeling that in the body, the language of music, ...because those dreams are kind of located within ourselves in a certain way, you know? And that process of manifesting the dream process or the music process, or the creative process, to the external world is this really embodied visceral experience. And I'm just thinking about the nature of Indigenous language for myself, Anishnaabemowin, and then for you, Lakota. I was just wondering, in terms of that mouth-feel, or that visceral feeling of the language passing through your mouth to the external world, do you have two or three favorite Lakota words you can share with us? Because we always talk about Anishinaabemowin: "Oh, that's my favorite word to say!!"

KITE

I mean...I don't know if it's my favorite mouth.. like that mouth feeling word. Lakota has many poetic words that are formed in your mouth exactly how you would experience them. But I, of course, really like the words for dream, because dream and vision are the same term: *iháŋble*. It's a cool word because visioning is such an important part of Lakota philosophy and living. There's so many versions you've got, you know: *to dream, a dream, to dream things, bad dream* as in a dream, which I think I saw a reference to this that I know in Dakota and I'm pretty sure must be in Lakota too...you don't say "as clear as day." That's an English phrase. "Oh, I saw it as clear as day." No, you say: "as clear as in a dream," or "as clear as in a vision," because the dream vision world, the *iháŋble*, is more real than this world, this physical waking world. David Posthumus explains it as if we experience the the pure interiority of other beings and spirits in the Dream Vision world, and we experience the false face of things in this world. Yeah, you can dream about yourself, about each other, dream of fire, dream of ghosts, be an animal dreamer or a bear dreamer, snake dreamer, you know. That word can get morphed into so many different possible words. It can even be a verb, to fast and in to get the dream to quest to search for a dream. Yeah, and it also can be a term for accessing something via a dream. Yeah, it's just a really flexible word. My other favorite word is *šlušlúte*, [laughs] which means "lubricated." *šlušlúte*.

SCOTT

And how would one use that in a sentence, Suzanne?

KITE

That road is so *šlušlúte*....very slippery. [SCOTT: laughs]. The other word I found out this week, which I can't remember what the Lakota term is, but the way you say *boyfriend* is the same word for [or] interchangeable with [the word] *employee*, and like, person who goes to war for you. So it makes total sense.

SCOTT

Feels like there's a politics in there, but that's good.

KITE

It's the natural order of things [SCOTT: laughs].

SCOTT

In a paper I did a few years ago now, t I was writing about Anishnaabemowin and the origin of, like— we oftentimes hear [that] the language and the land are inseparable, the relationship between land and language are really one in the same. I'd never really understood that until I started thinking about the sound of language, right? Manuel de Landa did this talk in 2011, I think, [about] the materiality of language. He talks about the sound of languages not [as] a conceptual thing. And it's not even a cultural thing. But it's this thing that comes from the landscape of our bodies, like from our esophagus, our lungs, the wetness of our saliva, the tongue, the teeth, and he really talks about it as this sort of emerging. And when I think about those sounds that come out of our bodies that form this amazing thing that is the language, I think about the wind and how you describe the wind tunnel, or the Wind Cave...

SCOTT

One of the words that I love most [in Anishinaabemowin] is *Agwayaashka*, which is the sound of the waves rolling onto shore. I always thought that's kind of the way it comes out of your mouth. It just feels like [the] physical property of waves, that sort of beautiful feeling [that] you can feel the waves when you say that word. You know, I think that's a very beautiful part of Anishinaabemowin that our physical world is reflected in the language itself and the way we speak embeds ourselves within the land. So I don't know if you feel the same way about Lakota. I imagine you probably do.

KITE

I mean, I'm not fluent enough to capture the finer poetic details. Now, hopefully I will be later. I learn new words basically every day. And the more I learn the more the religious philosophy of Lakota makes more sense. a big transformation for me was understanding...or just asking questions

about the words for *unknowable*. And words for *prayer*. I remember my grandfather pointed out that we kind of use a mistranslation of prayer, that it's all about crying *for* something or crying *to* something. And that is so different than the Western word for prayer. It defines exactly how one should approach the unknowable and powers beyond ourselves. It's humbling - there's nothing demanding about it. You are crying for something, begging. When you're in ceremony, there is a palpable quality of being smaller. To me, I feel smaller than I've ever felt, in the universe. I'm so small. We're just kind of floating here for a very brief moment. And that's very palpable then. But it's sonically palpable in song form. And yeah, I don't know. It's hard to sort out what is perceptible in that, but it's imperceptibility is probably the interesting part.

SCOTT

Thinking about what you were talking about, like just floating here. My *gwiimay*, the late Stan Williams, back when I was just still very young...[told me] the word for “rattle” in Anishinaabemowin is *zhiishiigwan*. And he told me that the rattle represents the universe itself. And then he says, “ah you'll understand it when you're supposed to understand it”. It took me all the way up to probably like, you know, a number of years ago to really think about it when I started thinking through the sound of *zhiishiigwan* not only the word, *zhiishiigwan*, but the sound the rattle makes. When you listen to, recordings of the cosmic background radiation of the universe, that's basically white noise, right? This sort of ordered, chaotic sound, — this frequency that does that— I think the sound of the rattle is that. It's that noise that replicates the sound of the universe. I think it's a very beautiful connection to sound and the ceremonial, and our positionality between dreams and the cosmic, [and] that pitiful place that we are [in] as humans, in the face of the big unknowable. The big mystery of the world.

It's interesting how, especially for initial Anishinaabemowin, Anishinaabe ontology is that sound really ties us to the human experience. I think it's like for me, dream as materials, and then sound as a material, [are] the two most important things before the visual. It took me a long time to realize that the visual comes after all those things...

KITE

Yeah. I don't know enough Lakota to explore this, but I think there's got to be more ways to describe hearing and dreams. Even this phrase, *Oihanbleta namahun kte*, is: “he will hear me in his dreams”. It's clear that hearing in dreams and visions is a significant part of living. But...there's got to be better words to describe the distinction between audibility, orality, and the spiritual transfer of knowledge.

I spent a lot of time talking to the singer Santee Smith, who's a peyote singer. He describes this entrance of the song into his, into his heart, into his mind. And it comes to him, it slowly forms or can hit very quick, or it can be delivered through a bird, or [it] just wells up in him, and needs to

come out. That's also similar to the way my grandfather described...or I asked him where a song comes from...and he's like, "Oh, it comes from inside the vocal cords." He didn't say vocal cords, but he pointed to his throat, where it comes from [in] the body, and it just comes through. And I know there's a relationship between that and visualness and dreams. I think it has to do with the kind of language state that our brain is in during dreams, where some of us dream in Russian, some dream in English, some dream in music, which is a language, and I bet lots of people who code dream in code sometimes. Because what you practice all day is your vocabulary. It's the set that you're going to use. So I think when people spend their time composing that's what will come out. If you spend your time thinking about Lakota geometry, you might dream in that language. That's just my theory. I'm not a linguist or a neuroscientist but yeah, the hearing part of dreams. I don't know, maybe if I was more fluent, I would be able to, maybe I wouldn't want to distinguish so greatly between waking and sleep, waking and visioning.

SCOTT

I'm interested in the idea that you mentioned that I'm just thinking about [and that is] the encoding of sound, in terms of getting into the technical side of things, in terms of when we record sound, whether it be guitar sound, or analog instruments, or digital instruments, where those things are. You mentioned that you don't like high fidelity sound, you like Lo Fi or analog iterations. Can you talk a little bit about that?

KITE

Yeah, I'm working on a film called *Three Dreams*, which is me trying to make a film as closely as I can to three dreams that I had. There was one sonic part of the dream, where I was dreaming of a movie theater. I am in the movie theater and a film shows, and the music lets me know that a murder has occurred in the dream, that something bad has happened. There's no people in the dream. There's just a horse, and a murder that has occurred. But I know because of the music in the movie. And when we made the film, I'm still working through artistically what my visual aesthetic is because I'm a composer...I think I have a visual aesthetic, but it's hard for me to pinpoint because I don't really work in film and video. I wasn't trained in film and video. So this [is] the first film I've ever done with a crew and with really nice cameras, and [a] cinematographer, and lighting, and it taught me something very important, which is [that] I like my own video aesthetic. I like the way I use height, I like handheld [cameras], I like the point of view from my perspective, and I need to trust my own visual sense. But [the process] also pointed out to me that when I dream, things are not as clear as a RED camera. Things are wishy washy, they're forming as you look at them, it's like anything outside of your view in the dream is like infinite, anything could be there. It's like, you're just waiting for your brain to populate it in the film, there's a little bit of AI generated style GAN video. I think that's closer to somewhere between that and the RED camera is the texture of the dream. But the video and

the sound, the sound and the video, is more accurate, because it's extremely abstract, a little scary, mysterious. That's what dreams feel like, to me.

SCOTT

Maybe not the most precise word, but the imperfection of the things you're talking about, the Lo Fi like, there's texture. For me, high fidelity seems to be the human desire to encapsulate an objective reality that really doesn't exist, right. So we're always chasing the highest fidelity, the newest codec [that] is gonna really capture that guitar piece or that outside external world in a way that it's never been captured before. But when you're talking about like Lo Fi stuff, it [feels] more about the reality of being human and the experience of the imperfection of the world?

KITE

Maybe it's not Lo Fi or imperfect, but I think it leaves enough room for the imagination, the way that books do. I think that's my goal for making these like dream films: to walk the line between abstraction to the point that it's fictional, or watching a film, and the specificity of my dream, where I was experiencing these things. They were my reality when I was experiencing them. It's, of course, impossible to do that exactly, because real life is not dream-life. But it's a really fun exercise. I didn't script it. I just did drawing boards for each scene. And then on the fly, I just had to say yes or no, this looks like the dream like we got, or no, it doesn't look like the dream, we need to move over here. But it's difficult to do. Also, my memory of the dream changes, the more I talk about it. So now it's been years of talking about these dreams. And the reality keeps changing.

SCOTT

I find that really interesting because I think the ephemeral nature of dreams also extends across time too. I remember a lot of my dreams, but the meaning of those dreams has changed over time, right? It's like, new layers of meaning because I'm different. And so the memory, the materiality of memory...we feel like it's an amorphous thing and in ways it is, but there is a materiality of memory in terms of synaptic codes, the patterning that happens, you know, just like the language that we speak, or the sounds that we make. I find it really interesting that dreams maintain a capacity to shift and change even outside of ourselves. I think that's a beautiful thing.

KITE

Yeah, I'm working with a therapist right now who's very interested in trying to have me remember my first memories, which are interesting because they're mixed up with assumptions from photographs I have.

But my first actual memory is— I couldn't be older than three or four— and I had a bad dream. I remember precisely the dream, even now. In the dream I was woken up because there was a fire in the house and my parents died in the fire. I watched them get consumed by flames. And then I escaped the house. But I'm only three or four. So I can't open the side gate. I'm too short. And somebody opens the gate. Over the course of my life, the somebody who's opened the gate has changed. When I was super young, I assumed it was my babysitter because I loved my babysitter. When I was in elementary school being inundated with religious information, I was convinced that it was Jesus.

But then, now that I'm older, I know that I'm the one forming the characters. So obviously, it's me, opening the gate, I chose for the gate to get open. But that's a shifting conclusion, but the interesting part is, I remember the dream super clearly. I remember going and waking up my parents and saying that I had this bad dream. It's my first memory, I think I was three, it's pretty crazy that I remember it that I was able to know that fire kills.

SCOTT

I like the idea that these dreams as experiences remain in dialogue so that how we listen to them, right? They tell us a story every time we go back and reflect on them. And I think that's the way for me, it's a good way to sort of consider dreaming in terms of an active listening practice, right? Like, it's not a recollection, per se. You're just a memory bringing up a memory, but it's actually an active dialogue of revisiting these things and seeing what has shifted, what has changed, and what the meaning of the meanings have sort of grown, you know, so I think that's a good.....yeah, thank you for that. It's good for me to reflect on that.

I think that we went through all the things that I really wanted to touch on. So, is there anything else that you wanted to bring up in terms of listening, hearing...sound making...?

KITE

I guess I'll share my current artwork that I'm working on — trying to do this practice is, I'm trying to have Lakota geometry deeper embedded in my mind. And the only way to do that is to work on translating it every day, and work on my Lakota every day. The piece I've come up with is—it's going to be an embroidery machine in the gallery. And every day, or every week, I'll send in daily dreams or visions that I've had, and visions as in like— just things one can imagine could be a vision as well.

There are super special dreams and you're like “this is a special dream”, something significant is being delivered to me and you really know the difference, it's quite clear. But I'm just going to try to do the mundane silly dreams every day. Where I have the dream I make it out of symbols using City Redwings shape kit. And then I have the gallery embroider it everyday, so then at the end, there'll be

a whole roll of fabric covered in dream symbols that I've submitted surrounding the gallery. And that's going to be my way of practicing dreaming.

SCOTT

It's very interesting, is there an intention, maybe, to talk about the dream and those symbols? Are you trying to influence the dreams themselves? So that you can dream more...

KITE

I would like to. Yeah, I would like to be able to dream. I have a theory that I'll be able to dream in the symbols themselves; if I practice making them every day, if they're my language.

SCOTT

If you use them as a language every day. Yeah.

And the last question, just on this topic, I find it very interesting...do you find yourself, or at any point in the future, where you can add your own symbols to the kit that you're using like a pre-made? Like a pre-made kit, but do you ever hope you can dream up a symbol and that's going to be your configuration, your assemblage? It's gonna be your particular thing?

KITE

I think it could happen. I don't know. I don't know how long it would take though. Because, you know, I played violin for 20 years before I started to really dream in it.

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Scott Benesiinaabandan is an Anishinaabe (Obishkkokaang) intermedia artist that primarily works in photography, video, audio and printmaking. His research interests are the intersections of artificial intelligence and Anishinaabemowin. Currently, he is investigating audio works, light sculptures, and virtual reality. Benesiinaabandan has exhibited across Canada and internationally, notably Harbourfront's Flatter the Land/Bigger the Ruckus, Subconscious City at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, GHOSTDANCE at Ryerson Image Centre, unSacred at Gallery 1C03, mii omaa ayaad/Oshiki Inendemowin in Sydney, Blood Memories in Melbourne, and was commissioned by CONTACT Photography Festival in Toronto. He has also held residencies at Parramatta Artist Studios in Australia, Context Gallery in Derry, Northern Ireland, University Lethbridge/Royal Institute of Technology iAIR residency, and Initiative for Indigenous Futures and AbTec in Montreal. Benesiinaabandan received his MFA in photography from Concordia University.

Kite aka Suzanne Kite is an award winning Oglála Lakhóta performance artist, visual artist, composer and academic, known for her sound and video performance with her Machine Learning hair-braid interface. Kite's practice explores contemporary Lakota ontology through research-creation, computational media, and performance. Kite often works in collaboration with family and community members.