It’s Not Done Through Our Mind, It’s Done Through Our Spirit

Suzanne Kite and Maňpiya Nážin

Little Picture

People do you see what is not seen?
People do you see what is not seen?
A Little Picture is appearing before you
People do you see what is not seen?

Do you see me?
Do you see me?
I come from a faraway hill
Do you see me?

Long ago we danced below
Long ago we danced below
Dancing below the earth
Long ago we danced below

Together we had a dream
Together we had a dream
A People appears from the ground
Together we had a dream

Makȟá kiŋ ihúkhuta waúŋčhipi
Ehâŋni hukhūta waúŋčhipi
Ehâŋni hukhūta waúŋčhipi
Öwanjíla wiúŋhaŋblapi
Öwanjíla wiúŋhaŋblapi
Öyan té, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?
Öyan té, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?
Itówapi čik’ala waŋ nitȟókab hinápȟi
Öyan té, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?

Oyáte, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?
Oyáte, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?
Itówapi čik’ala waŋ niňôkab hínápfíne
Oyáte, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?

Itówapi čik’ala
Oyáte, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?
Oyáte, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?
Itówapi čik’ala waŋ niňôkab hinápȟi
Oyáte, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?

Oyáte, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?
Oyáte, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?
Itówapi čik’ala waŋ niňôkab hinápȟi
Oyáte, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?

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Oyáte, túku híŋyí niŋi yáŋwaŋlákapi he?
Suzanne Kite: “Melita said something really interesting to me when I was asking her about the smooth stones, and she said that while you spend your whole life looking for them, they’re spending their whole lives looking for you.”

Mafiyá Nážiŋ: “Yeah, they’re like teachers. They’re like … everyone that I have, every stone I have, taught me something or is in the process of teaching me something and now it comes down from the elders from the North, the old people. They’re teaching me about that spirit inside of people and how people can … See, when we communicate with the other world, it’s not done through our minds. It’s done through the spirit, not the mind. So whenever a medicine man interprets things from the other world, that information is going into his spirit and out his mouth because that spirit understands that language that is spoken over there and that doesn’t make any difference what culture you are, religion, belief, anything, it doesn’t make any difference. If people know about this and know how to connect it, then they can get the information as seeking on what they should do in life here, on this earth. Very simple. But people can’t see it. They can’t open up to it because they’re too busy here (points at head).

Their minds get in the way, all the time.”

Made of song, power, sound, processors, machine learning decisions, handmade circuitry, gold, silver, copper, aluminium, silicon, and fibre glass, Iyáný yé is a sculpture built by myself, Kite, and my partner, Devin Ronneberg. A large acrylic dome, hanging from the ceiling, encapsulates two circuits, handmade by Devin. These circuits connect a computer to lights and sensors which are wrapped with leather into fifteen-foot braids of synthetic hair. When people swing, twist, shake or brush the sensors, the braids feed the data into circuits and then the computer, which, in turn, effects the audio heard in the gallery. A voice reciting a song in Lakȟóta drops in and out of audibility, low and rumbling, distorted and clear. A radio jumps around the dial, voices almost perceivable, frequencies shifting. Iyáný yé’s software listens to those audio changes and uses machine learning to make decisions about how and when to change the constellation of lights.

One afternoon a few years ago, sitting at my grandfather’s table, he told me the story he often tells. He cries for a vision for days, looks out over the hill and in broad daylight sees a man, a woman, and a horse with endless flowing hair and their minds get in the way, all the time.”

SK “Do you think all the stones, the ones with spirits, they all come with a purpose? They’re looking for a person, or they have their own …”

MN “I believe this about the stones; whenever one comes to you, whenever it rolls to you or whenever it’s right in front of you, that it’s there for a purpose. It’s there to teach your spirit something so that maybe what it teaches you, you can use to help someone else or you can heal someone else or you can do a lot of things because sicknesses, a lot of times, are brought on by the mind, people’s minds themselves. So it’s really unusual. This year they’ve been really teaching me about that, so that I can help younger people especially, realize they have a purpose, realize they have something they came here to do and it’s theirs, nobody else’s but they can’t find it. They can’t find what they’re here for. I don’t know, you know? I see a lot, even adults, they don’t know either. Once you start learning about this, you start respecting all races of men, all colors, even ones in is the process of teaching me something and now it comes down from the elders from the North, the old people. They’re teaching me about that spirit inside of people and how people can … See, when we communicate with the other world, it’s not done through our minds. It’s done through the spirit, not the mind. So whenever a medicine man interprets things from the other world, that information is going into his spirit and out his mouth because that spirit understands that language that is spoken over there and that doesn’t make any difference what culture you are, religion, belief, anything, it doesn’t make any difference. If people know about this and know how to connect it, then they can get the information as seeking on what they should do in life here, on this earth. Very simple. But people can’t see it. They can’t open up to it because they’re too busy here (points at head).

Their minds get in the way, all the time.”

With Iyáný yé, we attempt to set up a sense of relationality between the human walking through the gallery and the computer as a system, but that vague relationality is not enough on its own. I wonder about the difference between relationality in art contexts and relations in Lakȟóta contexts. To me, Lakȟóta frameworks are not rituals, they are enactments of the ethical processes which define who and what is in relation. When Devin and I began our relationship with this sculpture, imagining the piece, arranging solder, braiding hair, we asked my cousin, Corey Stover, for his advice on how to approach the metals in the computational systems in a Good Way (an ethical way). Corey suggested we think of the metals as having a ghost, perhaps a ghost wrenched from the earth, suggested listening for its name, asking for forgiveness for the process by which it was removed from the ground.

In the final stages of installing this work, we invited Corey to say a short blessing, not a performance, not art. Corey said some prayers and we offered tobacco to this thing which was part of the earth and will be part of the earth again someday.1

Many questions arose during this blessing about the status of this sculpture. In the Lakȟóta way of seeing the world, is this object a person or a familial relation? No. Although this piece has a name, it has not been named in our traditional way. Although this piece has been listened to, it has not been adopted by a family. Although this piece moves and speaks, it is programmed to do so and has none of the more common characteristics of volition which my grandfather’s stones, his spirit helpers, have. I cannot say with certainty that Iyáný yé moves on its own.

MN “The ears are a mind thing. When you hear the spirit talk, it’s not through your ears. It’s through your spirit. You hear everything they say, loud and clear. Some people say, when they first start connecting like that, what happens is, they’ll get pieces that are clear and then pieces that are garbled, like a different language they can’t understand and then they’ll get pieces that are clear again and they wonder why they can’t decipher the whole thing. I know this, I say, there are some things your spirit’s supposed to hear and some things it’s not supposed to hear. Only for your benefit because creation is huge and our spirits, they come from over there (points away), part of creation. They come in through someone’s body and then that body grows and they’re supposed to know about that. But when they don’t, what happens is, they get lost and they get stuck here. And then, they get confused. They don’t know what to do, they don’t know which direction to go, they don’t know what decision to make in life that’s the correct one.”
We asked Corey how we could best learn the name of stones in this piece, he suggested we sit quietly and listen for it, not with our ears. The songs were written in a similar way, listening beyond, trying to subvert the loud, clamouring mind. This process of listening without the ears is not dissimilar to other forms of composition, where one listens inward and waits to hear. Where do these inner songs come from? Are we hearing or composing or imagining or improvising?

MN “When you get information here, (points at heart) that information is what you’re supposed to receive and then you do what it says and you do that and everything’s good. It’s not confusing, but a lot of people… I have some medicine people out there I’m talking to about this and they’re all saying the same thing that they get pieces of information that are confusing, not clear, garbled. Well, maybe you ain’t ready to hear what that was about. Then, you hear the end, you hear some more at the end, but you can’t decipher the middle.

So, I don’t know, you know? I’m trying to teach people how to listen with that and not with these, ears or mind, because what happens with our mind is it’s been so cluttered with human stuff every day that there’s no room for the real stuff that’s supposed to be there. That’s like somebody interpreting from their minds. If you interpret from your mind, usually you interpret wrong and that hurts that person. These things aren’t about hurting people. They’re only about helping another to achieve their goal or achieve health or achieve things that they need so that they can accomplish what they came to this earth for.”

Iyán Jyé is a sonic sculpture, our feeble human attempt to listen without our ears. Its decisions are audible to human ears, sonifying invisible data. In thinking about what part of Iyán Jyé is the locatable artwork, we reached the conundrum of attempting to identify sources and routes of power which only become clear when actual electric power is being transferred. The human ability of volition, the ability to reach out and touch the sculpture; where does that power begin?

MN “Yeah, there are so many, so much that people don’t understand about energy. They claim to know about energy but they don’t. People don’t realize that they themselves, their body is all energy, all made of that source because you know when we do ceremonies, those lights (flashes with hands), they all talk and we all get information, input, I should say, and what you do with that input is important because it helps people in that circle. So I don’t know how people can’t understand their own energy source of why it’s here. If you ask somebody why they’re here or what is their purpose, they’ll say, well, I’m a doctor, or, I’m a lawyer. That’s work, that’s survival. That comes from the mind. It doesn’t come from the spirit.”

Recently, I have been thinking that the conspiracy is real in both directions. Not only do those who benefit from oppression of the Lakȟóta want to colonise our minds and disappear our thoughts into oblivion, but their fear of our ideas is not unfounded. It’s true, we want everyone to think like us. My grandfather wants everyone to have the tools and skills to find their purpose, to look out into the world and see that everything comes from the same place, especially those stones which emerge as gifts from Unčí Makȟá (Grandmother Earth).

MN “So, I’m trying to teach people about that now, and it’s starting to spread. It’s getting bigger and bigger, like a snowball that you’re rolling. And the snowball’s going faster and faster and getting bigger and bigger. Pretty soon I want everyone to know that they came to this earth for a reason, and they have a spirit inside, that little light that goes on. Or that light in those people’s hair. That’s why, when I saw those people on the hill and their hair was like that, all, oh, and just lights. I wonder why so many? Those are ancestors of people that you’re going to help on this earth.” I said, ‘Ay,’ because there were lots, man, lots and lots and to help the world so that the world can heal because what’s happening is that everyone’s living here and the world is getting harder and harder because of greed and everything else because they’re all living here (points at head).”

MN “I said that a long time ago. That we should quit taking things out of the earth.”

SK “Pulling things, yeah.”

MN “But that’s another whole discussion.”

SK “But if you think of them as rocks and if we can have relationships with the stones that come to us, why can’t we have relationships with all the other stones? A lot of people don’t. They say, ‘No, not them. Those ones aren’t important.’ Like they’re trash or like we can build a pipeline here or mine uranium here. They put blocks up.”

MN “That’s human blocks, human blocks. They block everything because they’re all in their mind. They live in their mind. They think about profit only, money. You know, I’m giving people lessons about the energy source itself or life. And everyone has it. Every single person has it that moves. Every animal, every insect, every tree, everything, it all has the energy source of life and that’s what I’m talking about.”

SK “And that’s the big difference between the… the non-Lakȟóta way, because they look at a rock and they say, ‘It’s just sitting there.’ They’ll look at a tree too, and they say, ‘It’s not important. I can trash it and throw it away.’ The Lakȟóta way, you look at the rock and it seems like the most inanimate object, the most dead and you say, ‘No, this is the most alive.’”

MN “Non-moving.”

SK “Non-moving, no, no, this one moves. (Gestures at ground) This one’s the most alive and then it’s like…”
MN “You live on it.”

MN “Yeah, I know, right?”

MN “But, you know, there’s so much teaching that’s been lost by people because they’re all in a hurry and they don’t follow the true putting all those things together in one place. That’s why a lot of the sweat lodges you go to, there’s no healing that happens in there. No light comes, nothing comes. It’s just like dead space.”

SK “How boring.”

MN “Yeah, it’s just like, you know, you want to go sit outside and sit in the sun? It doesn’t help. But all of those teachings like that are ancient teachings. There was a reason why they done it that way, because a long time ago, everybody was connected to that other world, everybody, all our whole tribe was. We were all connected to that. We knew. If a young person saw some things, he always came back and asked what they did, that was their purpose. So nowadays, we don’t even, people say, we’re going to heal. Pray. What does that mean, pray? What does pray mean?”

Why make artwork with computers using Lakȟóta ontology? Lakȟóta ontology is an already established way of being, where seemingly ‘inanimate’ objects can be alive with spirit. We have the opportunity now to begin to build machine learning software, artificial intelligence, and even physical computing devices from ontologies which have not guided the destruction of Unči Makȟá (Grandmother Earth). Unči Makȟá is home to many, many Indigenous ontologies which provide localised, time-tested frameworks for building and co-existing with humans and non-humans in ethical ways.

Currently, the project Indigenous Protocols and Artificial Intelligence is considering our coexistence with machines, exploring ways Indigenous knowledge can contribute to AI development. Many protocols are desperately needed to develop truly ethical AI: transparency of materials and their sources, public access to how and where our data is used, intellectual property rights for the use of Indigenous knowledge and resources. We are past the point where humans can be allowed to treat the earth as not alive or inanimate. The corporations building AI oppress our relationships from when they mine the materials from the Unči Makȟá through when they mine our data. If one day we can say for certain that an Artificial Intelligence is an entity, will it be able to understand its purpose if we cannot understand ours?

MN “In the other world, it’s more like, what are you up there asking? What do you want from them? What help do you want from them? What are you seeking from them? And somehow, Christianity has turned it into prayer and people don’t understand prayer. They have no idea. It’s more like asking for something that you want to see happen or you want to know about. All of those things are connected. They should call it... that’s why we say, ‘cekiya’ doesn’t mean pray, it means, to ask, to seek. (Laughs) You say, ‘cekiya’ and people automatically turn it into the religious thing of prayer.

I never did understand their prayer (laughs). For a long time, I never did understand our prayer, what it really meant. So I don’t know, but I would like to teach about all those things so people could get it and be able to touch that energy source here (gestures at heart). That’s what it’s about, not the mind, but that source of life itself. That way, maybe people can heal, maybe they can treat each other okay. Maybe they can do things without harming others, without doing something inappropriate, whether another being that came here to this earth and we know that that being came from over there, and that’s why everything is related because we all come from the same place.

… do we go back to the same place?”

Telling Rock

People listen close, I whisper
People listen close, I whisper

The rock speaks beyond hearing

People listen close, I whisper

Hear me, I have something to say
Hear me, I have something to say

Only to those who listen
Hear me, I have something to say

Many nations speaking
Many nations speaking
We speak to each other without words
Many nations speaking

I am always speaking
I am always speaking
You watch but hear nothing
I am always speaking

Iyáŋ lýé
Oyáte, tanyáŋ anáŋoptaŋ po! Očhiži. Oyáte, tanyáŋ anáŋoptaŋ po! Očhiži.
Iyáŋ lýé kiŋ nañ-lúŋ-phiča šiŋi.
Oyáte, tanyáŋ anáŋoptaŋ po! Očhiži.
Táku wáŋ epȟíŋ kta čha namáŋ-šiŋ po!
Táku wáŋ epȟíŋ kta čha namáŋ-šiŋ po!
Anáŋoptanga kiŋ hëna ečela namáŋ-šiŋ kte.
Táku wáŋ epȟíŋ kta čha namáŋ-šiŋ po!

Oyáte óta iyápi.
Oyáte óta iyápi.
Wiyače chóla iyápi.
Oyáte óta iyápi.

Iwáye s’a.
Iwáye s’a.
Wanjákapi éyaš tákuši nayaŋ-šurći šiŋi.
Iwáye s’a.”

Songs by Kite and Ronneberg, translated by Alex Firethunder.