SUZANNE KITE
AN INDIGENOUS MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST

Anne-Marie Boisvert, Ph.D. in philosophy, January 20, 2021

Suzanne Kite et **Devin Ronneberg**, *Itówapi Čík'ala (Little Picture)*, ISEA 2020
(Screen capture from the video)
https://art2020.isea-international.org/art-portfolio/suzanne-kite

      Suzanne Kite is an Indigenous multidisciplinary artist from the Oglalas Lakotas tribe (a Sioux tribe), originally from South California. She is currently completing a Ph.D. in Design and Computation Arts at Concordia University in Montreal, under Jason Edward Lewis' direction, who is also of Indigenous origin (Hawaiian, Cherokee, and Samoan). Kite works in milieus as diverse as music, performance, sculpture, and installation and incorporates new technologies from artificial intelligence in her works. She is co-director of

Unheard Records, which offers recordings of experimental electronic music. Among the recordings one can find the album *People You Must Look at Me*, which was composed for the bodily interface, with video and sound made by Kite herself on the topic of eternal death (link: https://unheardrecords.bandcamp.com/album/people-you-must-look-at-me). Suzanne Kite has also authored theoretical texts.

In 2018 Kite published in the Journal of Design and Science (MIT Press) an article co-authored with Jason Lewis, Noelani Arista and Archer Pechawis titled "Making Kin with Machines" (link: https://jods.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/lewis-arista-pechawis-kite/release/1). The title is quite an endeavour and adequately synthesises what we feel makes Suzanne Kite's work remarkable and contemporary, both artistic and theoretic. On the one hand, privilege is granted to commitment and dialogue instead of separation or confrontation. On the other hand, an interest is granted to what is agreed to be "artificial intelligence" (AI) as it emerges and gradually takes place in contemporary life.

A major preoccupation unites all of Kite's proposals: a willingness to reconsider, reshape and retrace links, not only between the arts, but also more crucially, between the artist's traditional cultural heritage and the "developed" world of today and tomorrow, between human and non-human entities, natural and artificial.

Therefore, Kite insists multiple times in her text presentations and articles that in the Oglalas Lakotas's ontology (conception of the world) and ethic, "even materials such as metals, rocks and minerals can be capable of volition". This quotation is taken from the presentation text of *Itówapi Čík'ala (Little Picture)*, an interactive installation that combines sculpture and sound art created by Suzanne Kite in collaboration with multidisciplinary artist Devin Ronneberg (himself of Kanaka Maoli Hawaiian, Okinawan and European origin) and presented at the ISEA 2020 (link to a video of the artwork, with explanation from both creators: https://art2020.isea-international.org/art-portfolio/suzanne-kite). In this artwork, AI manifests itself with long braided hair weaved with flashing lights like a constellation. The spectator can interact with the braids/lights to affect and modify the sounds generated by the system. The artwork thus brings together and relates a human intelligence and a non-human intelligence.

In the article "Making Kin with Machines", Kite exhibits into more details the same conception of the world. She therefore underlines that according to the Lakotas' ethic and ontology that "stones are considered ancestors, stones actively speak, stones speak through and to humans, stones see and know. More importantly, stones want to help" (p. 12). And for the author/artist, the way of (re)considering stones and other materials as agents instead of inert entities can only have a direct incidence on the way to rethink the AI question. She reminds us that "AI is formed from not only code, but from the materials of the earth" (ibid). Finally, this conception of the world also

holds a central place in Suzanne Kite's contribution in the work group Indigenous Protocol and Artificial Intelligence (IP AI), a big societal and political, artistic and speculative project launched thanks to Jason Lewis' initiative.

The project brought together theorists, artists and computer scientists from the various Indigenous peoples of America and Oceania (as well as non-Indigenous people) for two conferences in Hawaii in March and May 2019. The goal was to reflect together on ways to make sure that traditional Indigenous values were considered in AI development to counter potential colonial biases on a development solely focused on so called "western" values. Briefly, the idea was to focus on values of reciprocity and responsibility as opposed to values of competition and exploitation. With this in mind, artificial intelligence systems are neither slaves (simple tools) nor masters, but collaborators. In other words, the idea was to find "the middle ground between *Blade Runner* (AI as slave) and *Terminator* (AI as tyrant), where AI and humans are in reciprocal relationship of care and support" as is indicated on page 11 of the 205 page document published January 30, 2020 after these meetings (the document can be downloaded from the following page: https://www.indigenous-ai.net/position-paper).

Kite's proposal is titled "How to Build Anything Ethically" (pp. 75-84 from the document). The artist describes in detail a way to build an AI ethic "the Good Way" (p. 75) so that it respects the aforementioned ethical principles and is modeled on the way traditional Indigenous sweat lodges are built.

More broadly, the different ways of conceiving artificial intelligence development systems suggested by Kite and the other participants of the Indigenous Protocol and Artificial Intelligence work group resonate beyond the circle of Indigenous groups. We are all called. Like the IP AI project instigators know too well, the rapid progression and advancement of AI in all aspects of our lives generate crucial ethical stakes to which we must answer. How can we counter social, racial or gender biases that systems often display? How can we control systems, applications, robots that are increasingly autonomous and increasingly performant? The reflections displayed here offer some inspiring leads.

Notes :

1. Suzanne Kite's website: http://kitekitekitekite.com/

2. On the problem of control in artificial intelligence, let us call to attention Anne-Marie Boisvert's review of *Human Compatible. Artificial Intelligence and the Problem of Control*, by Stuart Russell (2019), published in the first issue of IA CIAC MTL magazine in February 2020, http://ciac.ca/en/ai-ciac-mtl-01-02/.

3. For an excellent introduction to the ethical issues related to AI, written in an accessible format for a larger audience, we recommend philosopher and researcher in artificial intelligence Martin Gibert's (Université de Montréal) book titled *Faire la morale aux robots. Une introduction à l'éthique des algorithmes*, published by Atelier 10 in 2020). To order the book in French: https://boutique.atelier10.ca/products/d17-faire-la-morale-aux-robots-une-introduction-a-lethique-des-algorithmes-par-martin-gibert/.