

# List Projects 31: Kite

January 30 – May 18, 2025, Bakalar Gallery



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Kite is an artist, scholar, and composer whose work examines contemporary Lakǫ́ta ontology alongside machine learning and artificial intelligence.

For over a decade, Kite has worked with digital interfaces for music and live performance. One long-term project, a series of performances and installations, features a hair-braid interface—an interactive, wearable sculpture in the form of a hair braid that uses machine learning to translate a performer's movement and touch into video and sound. In parallel, Kite has developed an extensive body of scholarship on Indigenous protocols for AI, proposing more ethical futures for this technology. Much of her work is animated by a spirit of relation, enfolding both human collaborators—such as family members and other artists—and nonhuman entities, like stones and the components of computers (whose mineral sources also trace back to the earth).

In recent years, Kite has turned to dreams as both an ancestral technology and a research-creation methodology. In works that range from stone sculptures and embroidered deer hides to performances and a participatory web project, Kite translates her dreams (and those of others) into a visual language that has been stewarded by Lakǫ́ta women and two-spirit people. The artist then employs this vocabulary to create abstract scores for musicians to interpret. Her work is largely structured by acts of mediation

and translation, prompting viewers and collaborators to listen closely to each other as well as to dreams and nonhuman beings. All these transformations, Kite has written, are “guided by protocol: decisions and actions taken in order to enact relationships between the unknown and the known, the stones and the stars.”<sup>1</sup> She has characterized her life's work as an attempt to listen beyond human ears and toward the unknown.

The exhibition showcases video documentation of both individual and collaborative performances alongside written and visual scores composed by Kite. The show's centerpiece, *Wičháŋpi Wóihanbleya (Dreamlike Star)* (2024), is an installation with sculpture, video, and sound. A hallucinatory environment of doubles and reflections, *Wičháŋpi Wóihanbleya* centers a score realized as a constellation of small stones on a reflective floor. Behind them, a large projection shows an expansive network of stars littering a purple night sky. The recurrence of imagery and objects (stones, stars, and shapes) in the projected video, in its reflection in the mirrored floor, and in the sculpture itself evokes a vast, interconnected universe: land and cosmos are entangled in what Kite has called an “ancient and future dance.”<sup>2</sup>



Kite, *uŋčéla wilečhala, for Nathan Young (Waxing Crescent Peyote Moon)*, 2020. Silver thread and beads on black leather, 39 × 33½ in. (99.1 × 85.1 cm). Courtesy the artist

Front cover:

Kite, *Wičháŋpi Wóihanbleya (Dreamlike Star)*, 2024. Performance: REDCAT, Los Angeles. Courtesy the artist and REDCAT. Photo: Angel Origgi

1 Suzanne Kite, “Hél čaŋkú kiŋ ħpáye (There Lies the Road): How to Make Art in a Good Way” (PhD diss., Concordia University, 2023), 110.

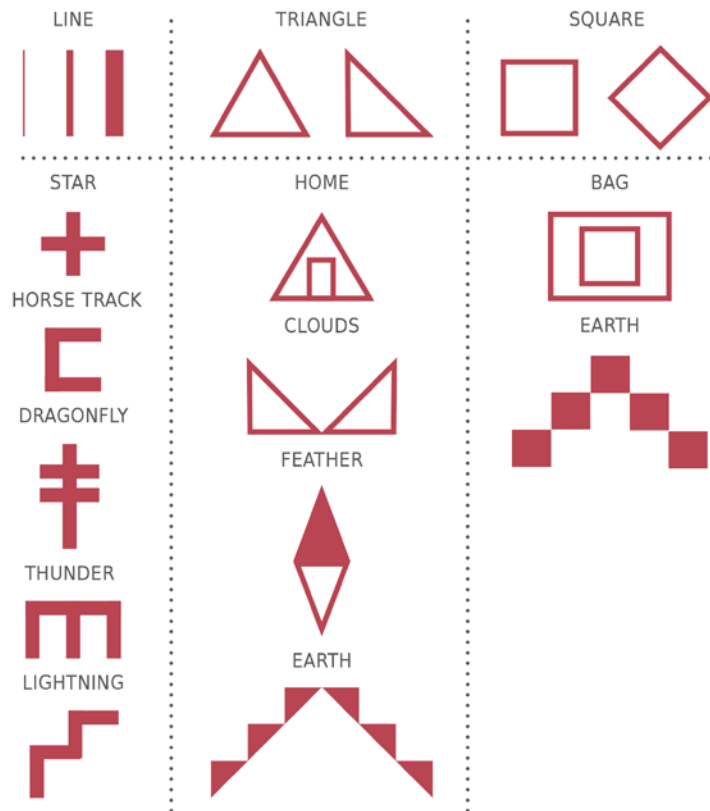
2 Kite, “Hél čaŋkú kiŋ ħpáye,” 100.

# Wičháŋpi Wóihanbleya (Dreamlike Star), 2024

Wičháŋpi Wóihanbleya began with three months of the artist's dreams. She used the Lakḥóta designer Sadie Red Wing's "shape kit" to translate her dreams into the geometric lexicon of Lakḥóta visual language.<sup>3</sup> Kite then reconfigured these groupings of symbols into a compact score that recurs throughout the exhibition: It is a sculpture realized with found stones on the floor, an animated video projection, and a score printed on the wall. An audio installation incorporates the artist's poetry and an orchestral realization of this score.<sup>4</sup> The interconnectedness expressed in this score's geometry reflects Kite's interest in "cosmologiescapes," a term she draws from the Tuscarora scholar and artist Jolene Rickard. Kite defines cosmologiescapes as "the web of human-human, human-nonhuman, and nonhuman-nonhuman relationships in a place, where place is the land and the cosmos and everything in between."<sup>5</sup> Within her work, this term takes on a specifically Lakḥóta meaning: The antinomies of dreaming and waking, land and sky, human and nonhuman are brought into forms of ethical and reciprocal relationship.

Among the Lakḥóta symbols that recur in Kite's work is the Kapémni, a twisting vortex represented by an hourglass-like shape. The Kapémni symbolizes what the Lakḥóta people understand as "a vivid relationship between the macrocosm, the star world, and their microcosmic world on the plains."<sup>6</sup> For the Lakḥóta, the movement of stars guides the movement of people and their ceremonies across the land. The constellation Wičhíŋčala Šakówiŋ (Seven Little Girls; also known as the Pleiades), for instance, corresponds to Black Elk Peak in South Dakota. "The circle of stars reflecting the circle of land around the Black Hills is more than a metaphor, but rather a psychical and spiritual landscape upon which the Kapémni is enacted by Lakḥóta," Kite has written.<sup>7</sup> Or, as a Lakḥóta elder, Stanley Looking Horse, put it, "What's on the earth is in the stars; and what's in the stars is on the earth."<sup>8</sup> This insight informs the various forms of recursion, symmetry, and mirroring that structure this work across its different iterations.

The constellation Wičhíŋčala Šakówiŋ provides the title for Kite's first score for a full orchestra, which appears on the wall



Sadie Red Wing's Lakḥóta grammar chart, 2016. Courtesy the designer

as a graphic score and a series of written instructions that guide the conductor and musicians through what the artist calls a "mutual dream." Kite likens the composition's different sections to cosmic bodies whose gravity pulls musicians together before sending them off into orbit. Seven times throughout the composition (corresponding to the number of stars in the constellation), performers are instructed to vamp (repeat a passage) until a "dreamlike state is achieved." When played by musicians, the score is a sustained exercise in relational listening: "No sound should be made without a listening ear to another being, another instrumentalist, or the stars."<sup>9</sup>

For a solo performance, which will take place in the gallery in April, Kite worked with choreographer Olivia Camfield (Muscogee) to assign a movement to each symbol in the Lakḥóta shape kit. During the performance, Kite stands among the stones and traces a path through the score with her body. Sensors on her body and on a long strand of braided hair capture her movement. Data from the sensors modulates the installation's video and audio (programmed by Sean Hellfritsch): pitching up and down, distorting and delaying. The video is a starry rendition of the score, glowing and shifting as the artist progresses through the composition's geometric components.

9 Commissioned by the American Composers Orchestra, the orchestral realization of this work was debuted by the Tucson Symphony Orchestra in September 2024.

3 As described by the Lakḥóta graphic designer Sadie Red Wing, this "shape kit" of geometric pictographs (feather, house, lightning, cloud) was traditionally used in Lakḥóta women's quillwork, in contrast to the more figurative drawings done by men. Many of Kite's recent scores and artworks have employed Red Wing's Lakḥóta shape kit and its distinct syntactic conventions of "repetition, combination, and reflection." Sadie Red Wing, "Learning the Traditional Lakota Visual Language through Shape Play" (master's thesis, North Carolina State University, 2016), [https://issuu.com/sadieredwing/docs/srw\\_thesis\\_2016/1](https://issuu.com/sadieredwing/docs/srw_thesis_2016/1) and <https://www.sadieredwing.com/lakota-visual-lang>.

4 Before they became a single score, Kite transmitted these designs week by week into an electronic embroidery machine installed in the galleries of the Center for Art, Research, and Alliances (CARA) in New York. They were embroidered onto a long roll of black fabric in a work titled *Ohanke Waníča (Infinity)* (2023). This served, in turn, as a score for a series of the artist's musical performances with collaborators, including klezmer violinist Alicia Svigals, Cherokee artist Robbie Wing, and the punk duo LEYA.

5 Kite, "Hél čhaŋkú kiŋ ḥpáye," 10.

6 Ronald Goodman, *Lakota Star Knowledge: Studies in Lakota Stellar Theology* (Sinte Gleska University, 1992), 16.

7 Suzanne Kite, "What's on the Earth Is in the Stars; And What's in the Stars Is on the Earth': Lakota Relationships with the Stars and American Relationships with the Apocalypse," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 45, no. 1 (2021): 150.

8 Stanley Looking Horse, cited in Kite, "What's on the Earth," 137. See also Goodman, "Mirroring: A Lakota Archetype," in *Lakota Star Knowledge*, 23–30.





Kite, in collaboration with Santee Witt, *Okáletkehan (Branching)*, 2021 (still). Courtesy the artist

The audio, which can also be heard in the gallery and consists of a poem layered with an orchestral realization of the score, evokes flight, dissolution, and dreaming. The text is read forward and then backward, echoing the chiasmic structure of the

performance itself: Once Kite reaches the center, she repeats her movements in reverse. What is above resembles what is below, and the ending returns to mirror the beginning.

## Wógligleya (T̥hunkášila Čečiyelo), 2021

"Where do new songs come from?" This question animates much of Kite's work, and she has posed it to many of her collaborators and interlocutors, including the Lakḥóta musician Santee Witt, with whom she created this score. For Kite, songs represent the constant presence of the unknowable within our world and within all of us. She engaged Witt during fieldwork for her dissertation, which theorizes creative practice based on community-grounded Indigenous methodologies and Lakḥóta ethics. Art, within this context, allows "for

the creation of new knowledge while pursuing the unknowable."<sup>10</sup>

"For Witt, the question of where songs come from is answered through the protocols and processes the composer enacts," Kite writes.<sup>11</sup> "He is the channel, prayer is the protocol, and in return he receives a song."<sup>12</sup> Witt's contribution to *Wógligleya* began with a practice of what Kite and musical collaborator Robbie Wing have referred to as "listening to nonhumans"—in this case, the birds in a tree outside Witt's house.<sup>13</sup> "When I sing

10 Kite, "Hél čanjkú kiŋ ḥpáye," 34.

11 Kite, "Hél čanjkú kiŋ ḥpáye," 71.

12 Kite, "Hél čanjkú kiŋ ḥpáye," 71.

13 Kite and Robbie Wing, "Listening to Nonhumans," *Ear Wave Event*, no. 7 (Spring 2023), <https://earwaveevent.org/article/listening-to-nonhumans/>.

this song, they start chiming in with like the Sun Dance whistles," Witt recounted.<sup>14</sup> The song that Witt sang with the birds was the beginning of his contribution to *Wógligleya*. Much remains unknowable about how songs are made, and many things, for Witt, are not appropriate to share in non-Native settings.<sup>15</sup>

*Wógligleya* was commissioned by Third Coast Percussion Ensemble in Chicago and generated through artist-led workshops with its musicians. Kite asked each of the ensemble's four members to represent one of their dreams using Sadie Red Wing's Lakḥóta shape kit. After receiving their designs, Kite hired the designer Unna Regino to combine them into a single score and Giorgi Janiashvili to animate it for live projection.

In the gallery, this score is shown alongside documentation of its performance with Third Coast Percussion Ensemble, Witt, and two other vocalists (Witt's daughter, Acacia Witt, and girlfriend, Melia Anthony). The piece, like *Wičháḥpi Wóihanbleya*, has a mirrored structure. During the performance, the percussionists begin with noise and move through pre-decided

personal interpretations of each symbol. After reaching the center of the design, the percussionists hold a chord, and Witt performs his own piece. The percussionists once again move through the score and exit the composition back into noise.

*Wógligleya* is accompanied by *Okáletkehan (Branching)* (2021), a documentary-style video work that offers a glimpse of Kite and Witt's conversations. In the first section, Witt demonstrates the drum he uses for ceremonies as a Native American Church Roadman, including the magnetic stones around its circumference that form a star pattern. He then shows several stones that he carries in his case and uses in prayers: a bulb of amethyst, a shiny shard of obsidian. The video's final section shows a small stone score that Kite made in response to Witt: a collaboration with Witt and with the stones themselves. "Stones are nonhuman beings that communicate to Lakḥóta people; the songs come from listening and connecting to them; ceremony is the enactment of all those things together," Kite has written.<sup>16</sup> "Art is the transformation of these relationships into physical form."<sup>17</sup>

## Take Care My Boy, 2021

*Take Care My Boy*, a noise set and subsequent performance for the camera, was conceived during a six-month period when Kite was processing the loss of both her grandfathers. "I come from families of artists and credit my grandfathers, Maḥpiya Nážin and Edwin Svigals, with making clear the importance of questioning what is known and unknown alongside their encouragements to sing in ceremony and play the violin," she has written.<sup>18</sup> She

positions her practice as a musician in dialogue with her family—including her grandfathers and her aunt, the klezmer violinist Alicia Svigals—as well as Lakḥóta musical traditions and contemporary Indigenous experimental music.

*Take Care My Boy* is a visual and sonic collage of that moment of grief. Footage of Kite's improvised choreography with her hair-braid interface is interspersed with

14 Kite, "Hél čanjkú kiŋ ḥpáye," 72.

15 "There's a lot of things I can't talk about. I got to keep secrets," Witt told Kite during their interview. Kite, "Hél čanjkú kiŋ ḥpáye," 72.

16 Kite, "Hél čanjkú kiŋ ḥpáye," 79.

17 Kite, "Hél čanjkú kiŋ ḥpáye," 79.

18 Kite, "Hél čanjkú kiŋ ḥpáye," 2.

an intimate archive of video and audio clips: her last recording of her grandfather Maḥpiya Nážin before his passing; pencil drawings made by her grandfather Edwin Svigals; and Kite cutting her hair short as part of a Lakḥóta mourning practice. These images forgo the fidelity of traditional field recordings; instead, captured on her cellphone, they are interrupted by noise and other forms of electronic manipulation. The performance also incorporates percussive samples, AI-generated text, and Kite playing a klezmer song on the violin.

Both *Take Care My Boy* and *Pḥehiṅ kiṅ líla akhišoke. (Her hair was heavy.)* (2019) were first performed at the Intertribal Noise Symposium, a forum for Indigenous electronic music curated by the artist Nathan Young (Delaware Tribe of Indians). Both works were presented in several iterations before Kite realized them on video, and unlike her more recent performances, they were not scored with Lakḥóta visual language. (Transcriptions of the performance's text and movement do exist, but they were created after the fact.<sup>19</sup>) Neither the live performances, texts, or videos are authoritative documents of these pieces: Like many works of Indigenous experimental music, they evade notational conventions and, particularly, forms of ethnomusicological capture. Following Raven Chacon (Diné), the various forms of

documentation and re-performance that comprise these works might be positioned "in the middle of a feedback loop," functioning as "both a transcription and a composition (or prescription)."<sup>20</sup>

In other words, these works resist what the scholar Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō/Skwah) has referred to as "hungry listening"—that is, settler-colonial modes of perception. Hungry listening is oriented toward the pleasures of familiarity and recognition, prioritizing "the capture and certainty of information over the affective feel, timbre, touch, and texture of sound."<sup>21</sup> Its fevered pace of consumption disregards consequences to lands, waters, and people. "To be starving," Robinson writes, "is to be overcome with hunger in such a way that one loses the sense of relationality and reflexivity in the drive to satisfy that hunger."<sup>22</sup> Kite's works, by contrast, enact and invite what she has described as "a specifically Lakḥóta form of listening"—one guided by protocol and respectful of all knowledge keepers, including elders, stones, and other nonhuman beings.<sup>23</sup> She elaborates on this phrase by citing a remark by her grandfather, Maḥpiya Nážin. "The ears are a mind thing," he told her.<sup>24</sup> "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."<sup>25</sup>



Kite, *Pḥehiṅ kiṅ líla akhišoke. (Her hair was heavy.)*, 2019. Performance: REDCAT, Los Angeles. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Steve Gunther

## *Pḥehiṅ kiṅ líla akhišoke.* (Her hair was heavy.), 2019

Kite has described *Pḥehiṅ kiṅ líla akhišoke* as "a feeble human attempt to listen without the ears but with the body in relation to AI."<sup>26</sup> The work is one of Kite's earliest performances with her machine-learning hair-braid interface, which she originally built with James Hurwitz and expanded with Devin Ronneberg. Kite refers to it as "something between instrument and sculpture"—it consists of a long braid of artificial hair entwined with sensors and wiring.<sup>27</sup> When shown as an interactive installation or used in a performance, the sensors collect data that is used by machine-learning algorithms to modulate light, sound, and video.

In her description of *Pḥehiṅ kiṅ líla akhišoke*, Kite specifies that its computer system is made from "song, power, sound, processors, machine learning decisions, handmade circuitry, gold, silver, copper, aluminum, silicon, and fiberglass."<sup>28</sup> For the artist, computers, the foundational tools of machine learning and artificial intelligence, along with electronic music, cannot be conceived apart from their material components—stones. "What are computers if not melted stones mined from the earth, from some location within a territory that contains human and nonhuman beings?" Kite argues.<sup>29</sup> "Forming a relationship to AI, we form a relationship to the stones and

19 See Kite, "Take Care My Boy," in *Breaking Protocol*, ed. Maria Hupfield (Inventory Press and Vera List Center for Art and Politics at The New School, 2023), 90–95; and Kite, "Pḥehiṅ kiṅ líla akhišoke. (Her hair was heavy.)," in *An Indigenous Present*, ed. Jeffrey Gibson and Janelle Porter (DeMonico Books/Big NDN Press, 2023), 311–17.

20 Raven Chacon, "Contrary Motions," in dialogue with Michael Nardone, *Aural Poetics*, March 14, 2023, <https://soundobject.substack.com/p/contrary-motions>.

21 Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), 38.

22 Robinson, *Hungry Listening*, 53.

23 Kite, "Hél čanġkú kiṅ ḥpáye," 31.

24 Suzanne Kite and Maḥpiya Nážin, "It's Not Done Through Our Mind, It's Done Through Our Spirit," *South as a State of Mind*, no. 11 (Fall/Winter 2019): 55.

25 Kite and Maḥpiya Nážin, "It's Not Done Through Our Mind," 55.

26 Kite, "Pḥehiṅ kiṅ líla akhišoke. (Her hair was heavy.)," 2019, Kite website, <https://www.kitekitekite.com/portfolio/peh-ki-lla-akhoke-her-hair-was-heavy-2019>.

27 Kite, "Pḥehiṅ kiṅ líla akhišoke."

28 Kite, "Pḥehiṅ kiṅ líla akhišoke."

29 Kite, "Hél čanġkú kiṅ ḥpáye," 18.



the mines from which they come . . . . If we can approach this relationship ethically, we must reconsider the ontological status of each of the parts which contribute to AI, all the way back to the mines from which the technology's material resources emerge from Un'ci Makhá (Grandmother Earth).<sup>30</sup>

In *P'hehíj kin lila akhíshoke*, Kite performs sequences of movement that alternate between frantic and methodical: She arches her back, contorts her body, and pulls her mouth open in a silent scream. Its choreography, like that of *Wičháŋpi Wóihanbleya*, was developed in collaboration with Olivia Camfield. The sensors on the hair-braid interface control the playback of AI-generated text that is sometimes obliterated by other sounds: growling synths, a call to prayer, flashes of radio broadcasts from India, China, and Norway. A machine-learning algorithm, in turn, listens to the audio and manipulates a video projection behind the artist. The paranoid, rambling text heard in the piece was created using a generative pre-trained transformer (GPT).<sup>31</sup> Its speaker questions the boundaries of reality and identity: "Am I real? I should be real, right? You're lying," it says repeatedly.

The piece culminates with an ominous prayer to the element of uranium: "Give us this day our daily isotopes / And forgive us our accidents as we forgive those whose accidents damage us / Lead us not into cancer but deliver us from radiation." *P'hehíj kin lila akhíshoke*, Kite writes, "turns

away from healthy relationships with stones . . . terraforming Western religions into violent material-worshipping rituals."<sup>32</sup> The piece was created as the artist was researching US cultures of conspiracy and the effects of nuclear weapons development on Indigenous people. These weapons, she proposes, are "the material result of the American fear of the unknown . . . executed as warfare and violence. This will be the materials of further colonization into space."<sup>33</sup> Settler colonialism and genocide are the ontological ground for ever-more-rapacious expansions and annexations: across oceans, deep into the earth, and into outer space.<sup>34</sup>

But, as Kite explains, "the Lakota have already mapped the stars and established an ethical way of connecting to the stars, from birth to death and the mysterious in-between, accepting the unknown as the Great Mystery."<sup>35</sup> Even as *P'hehíj kin lila akhíshoke* performatively enacts the dystopian endpoint of the settler-colonial death drive, her movement, in concert with the hair-braid interface, embodies an already existing and enduring spirit of relation. "Every moment of decision, every act of creation," she has written, is a "collaboration between stars and stones, the macro and the micro, the movement of the cosmos and Spirit World and the physical reality of earth and stones."<sup>36</sup> Like all of her work, *P'hehíj kin lila akhíshoke* is an experiment in ethically meeting—and greeting—the unknown.

30 Kite, "Hél čhaŋkú kin ŋpáye," 18. See also her landmark collaborative article "How to Build Anything Ethically," in which Kite compares the construction of a sweat lodge with the creation of a computing system. Just as Indigenous protocols offer a "Good Way" of doing the former, they can do the same for the latter. Kite, in discussion with Corey Stover, Melita Stover Janis, and Scott Benesiinaabandan, "How to Build Anything Ethically," in *Indigenous Protocol and Artificial Intelligence Position Paper*, ed. Jason Edward Lewis (Initiative for Indigenous Futures and the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, 2020), 75–84, [https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/986506/7/Indigenous\\_Protocol\\_and\\_AI\\_2020.pdf](https://spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/986506/7/Indigenous_Protocol_and_AI_2020.pdf).

31 The text was generated with GPT-2, a much more rudimentary predecessor of OpenAI's GPT-4, which is the basis for the company's ChatGPT product.

32 Kite, *An Indigenous Present*, 311.

33 Kite, "What's on the Earth," 142.

34 See Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011); and Lou Cornum, "The Irradiated International," *Data and Society*, 2018, <https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/ii-web.pdf>.

35 Kite, "What's on the Earth," 152.

36 Kite and Wing, "Listening to Nonhumans."

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**Kite** (aka Suzanne Kite; b. 1990, Sylmar, CA; lives and works in Catskill, NY) is an Oglála Lakhóta artist, composer, and scholar. Her artworks and performances have recently been featured in the 2024 Whitney Biennial, New York; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; Center for Art, Research, and Alliances, New York; and the 2024 Shanghai Biennial; among other venues. Her awards and honors include a Ruth Award, a 2023 United States Artist Fellowship, a Creative Time open call commission (with Alisha Wormsley), and a Creative Capital grant. She is currently Director of Wihanble S'a Lab, Distinguished Artist in Residence, and Assistant Professor of American and Indigenous Studies at Bard College. Kite holds degrees from California Institute of the Arts, Bard College, and Concordia University. She is an enrolled member of the Oglála Sioux tribe.

*List Projects 31: Kite* is organized by Selby Nimrod, Director of Exhibitions and Commons, MIT School of Architecture + Planning and former Assistant Curator, and Zach Ngin, Curatorial Assistant.

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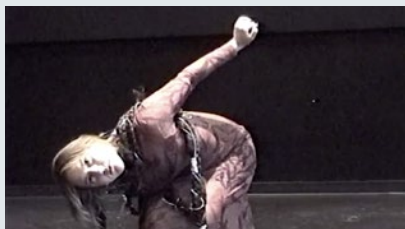
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Friday, February 28, 2025, 12:15 PM

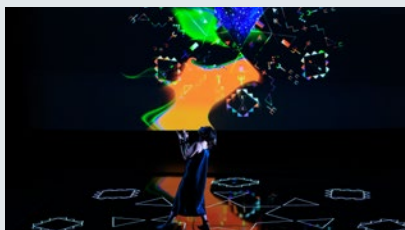
In-person program



### Graduate Student Talk: Jonathan Zong

Wednesday, March 5, 2025, 5:30 PM

Hybrid program



### Performance: *Wičháŋpi Wóihanbleya* (*Dreamlike Star*)

Thursday, April 17, 2025, Timing TBA

In-person program

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