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The Kite Choir

Abstract. This paper reports on the development of an ongoing artistic project, the Kite Choir, as an aesthetic practice of attunement with the atmosphere. The Kite Choir is a practice that builds on traditions of singing kites. In these traditions, the sound-making device is carried aloft by the kite, giving voice to an assemblage brought to life by the wind. The Kite Choir instead extends the site of instrumentation along the entire kite line and reel, to promote a collaborative chain of agency between atmosphere and performer/pilot. The paper describes the unique sound instruments and score created for this project and their relation to time and place of performance, and concludes with a set of speculative questions on how this practice might develop in the future.

Firat ERDIM¹

Keywords. *Sound, Atmosphere, Attunement, Kites*

Introduction

The Kite Choir² is a practice that builds on traditions of singing kites, such as those in China, Japan, Bermuda, and Vietnam. In these traditions, the sound-making device is carried aloft by the kite, giving voice to an assemblage brought to life by the wind. The Kite Choir instead extends the site of instrumentation along the entire kite line and reel, to promote a collaborative chain of agency between atmosphere and performer/pilot. This is a practice for “cultivating an ability to discern the vitality of matter,” which Jane Bennett argues, in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), is needed to draw us out of our “attachments to ideas that matter is inanimate and that real agency belongs only to humans or to God.” Bennett points to a need to “devise new procedures, technologies, and regimes of perception that enable us to consult nonhumans more closely, or to listen and respond more carefully to their outbreaks, objections, and propositions” (Bennett, 2010, 108). The Kite Choir is such a regime of perception, an aesthetic practice of attunement with the atmosphere.

One aspect of this practice is the making of the experimental instruments in anticipation of performance. Another is the building of skill in playing them, and the development of choreographies and scores that enable the use of this practice to engage the atmospheres of places and their weather. Electroacoustic composer Paula Matthusen has been a collaborator on the project, and has written a score that provides instructions based on varying aeolian, climatic, temporal, and psychological conditions.

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2. Image and video documentation of Kite Choir instruments and performances can be found at: <https://firaterdim.net/Kite-Choir>

The Instruments

The sound instruments of the Kite Choir are between two poles, neither allowing the human a sense of autonomous expression nor letting them off the hook with a passive ‘listening device.’ These instruments include *ribbon reels*, polyester ribbon kite-lines attached to contact mics and portable mini-amps, that make a sound similar to a giant, angry hornet; and *resonator reels* that work on the same principles as the tin-can telephone and sound like a kettle coming to a boil.

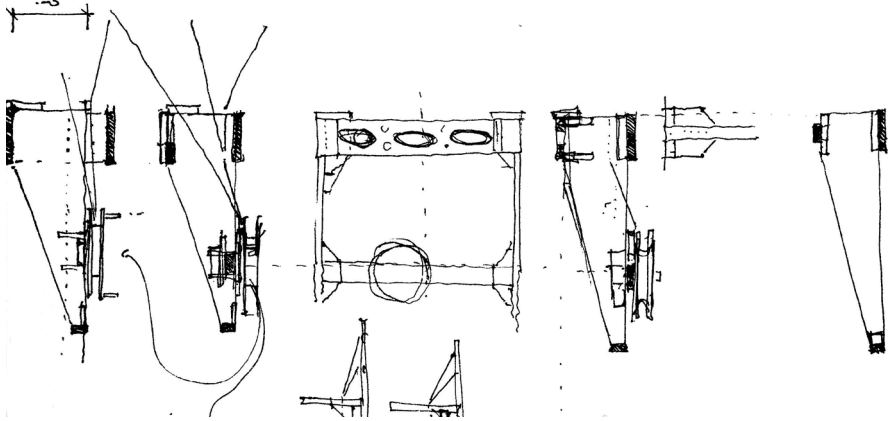


Figure 1. Sketches for an electric hurdy-gurdy reel. Firat Erdim, 2019

The Kite Choir instruments with the most complexity so far are the *hurdy-gurdy reels*. In this set of instruments, the kite’s tow line is nylon monofilament coated with rosin, which makes it slightly sticky. As it is reeled in and out, this tow line functions as a bow on a set of four to six musical strings, arranged low to high from reel to kite. The strings are played open - without fingering - in alternating pull and release across a single chord. The lowest string can be played alone, or one can incrementally contact more of the strings by varying the angle of the instrument in relation to the kite. As the bridges on most of these instruments have been flat, the lowest and highest strings usually have the most emphasis.



Figure 2. A series of acoustic hurdy-gurdy reels. Firat Erdim, 2018-19

Things get more interesting as the line extends further into the sky. As with an aeolian harp, the kite’s tow line and all of the strings on the instrument also vibrate in the wind independently of the bowing, due to vortex shedding. This sound is always the overtones of whatever each string is tuned to. The tow line of the kite, however, is changing in length and varying in tension as it is reeled in and out, so its vortex shedding sound can range from a soft cooing to a high, fiendish wail. As the tow line is vibrating

in this way, both from bowing and from vortex shedding, it acquires a thickness that can be used to engage the middle strings that otherwise don't sound out as much as the low and high ends. The sound that develops in each performance involves all of these factors, and others involving place and time, in an invariably improvisational entanglement.

The Score

Although these instruments are not made to play a piece of music in the conventional sense, at the start of the project in 2018, electroacoustic composer and musician Paula Matthusen wrote a score for them.



Figure 3. Paula Matthusen's score for the Kite Choir, printed as a set of playing cards. Design of the cards is by Kaitlin McCoy, 2018

The score, printed as a set of 'playing cards,' has four sets of variable instructions, contingent on aeolian, climatic (non-aeolian), temporal, and 'fuzzy' qualities. The aeolian category of instructions controls type of instrument and kite, and some flight instructions. For example, "high wind: single cell kite with hurdy-gurdy reel. Lean back into the wind, feel the kite as a buoy." The non-aeolian climatic category directs movement, such as: "fog: extremely slow, minimize all unnecessary actions," or "thunder/lightning: imagine movements but do not carry them out. Realize imagined

movements by vocalizing or breathing.” The temporal category determines triggers for playing and listening, such as “winter: pick two to three sonic cues from your body, and tie your actions to them,” or “night: look for lights moving in the sky, assign actions to planes, satellites, etc.” The fuzzy qualities category determines meditations, such as “pleasant: what does the air feel like on your skin? What surrounds you? How far can you transmit your skin, your breath, your thought?”

Matthusen wrote this score just as the first instruments were being made. Some of the flight instructions, triggers, and cues could use revision as the techniques and instruments have been further developed and refined since then. The instructions that are more meditative, playful, tie inside and outside, body and environment, and sharpen the practice as one of attunement have kept their relevance and continue to be incorporated. The instructions that forego kites and the instruments altogether - often because of inclement weather - have proven to be the most insightful because they question the boundaries between aesthetic practice and daily life.

Lessons of Place, Time, and Play

One way this practice impacts daily life is through its effects on time, or schedule. As just stated, the score does provide a number of instructions for inclement weather, even one in case of a tornado. One cannot choose the how of performance independently of the where and when. As a fisherman, farmer, or surfer would know, one is subject to the weather and must be on the lookout for the right conditions. The phrase, “weather permitting,” indicates a limitation but can also function as license, to break from chronological time into a kairological time, one based on the atmosphere.



Figure 4. Video still from Kite Choir Sounding: 9 June, 2019, Seyðisfjörður. Firat Erdim.

The practice of the Kite Choir transforms the perception of place as much as the qualities of place impact the sound of a performance. One learns to see the ground and its features - buildings, hills, trees, bodies of water - in terms of the wind. The place is the actual body of the instrument. Over the course of this practice so far, a light, smooth breeze in Venice, Italy, allowed the first overtones to emerge; in Seyðisfjörður,

Iceland, an attempted collaboration with an existing sound sculpture³ precipitated the possibilities of various tunings, and the joy of flying in fog; while in the textured, gusty winds of Iowa, USA, the static charge of approaching summer storms became audible.

The anthropologist Tim Ingold points out that while the atmosphere of meteorologists is devoid of affect and that of aestheticians lacks weather, sound “born of the fusion of the affective and the cosmic, where what is heard turns out to be our own hearing, also divides us such that - much as in a dream - we are simultaneously at home in our bodies and at large in the cosmos” (Ingold, 2015, 108).

At the start of the project, it was enough of a success to just to get the kite flying and have instruments sound out, as loudly as possible, even if they sounded frightfully awful. Even that took a lot of running around, many crashes, and it only seemed to work in the stiffest winds. After almost three years of doing ‘soundings’ in a handful of different places, below are a few insights that have emerged from that experience, and that parallel Ingold’s thoughts.

The kite should have just enough lift to fly, whether that is due to the lightest possible breeze or the use of very long tails. No running is necessary. The sound is not about action - of flying or falling or pulling or bowing - but about finding durations of suspension in the air. When the line is in a tensioned curve, reeling in and out becomes a breathing. Without the kite pulling up or the pilot pulling down, the two become momentary counterweights, appearing to be suspended from each other. The sound of that rare state of suspension is when nothing seems to be happening at all, even though all of the strings are vibrating together. The sense is not that of broadcasting sound out into an environment, but of diving into an atmosphere of sound.

Questions

As experiments in the instrumentation and choreographies of the Kite Choir continue, the primary question that is emerging is whether it could have a collective dimension as an aesthetic practice. Performing as an ensemble, what would it sound like to have multiple lines ‘sampling’ the air simultaneously? Might it be possible to map the flows and movements of the atmosphere in a field of sound? If the single line is a line of attunement between performer and kite and atmosphere, then what would happen as one performer starts also to align their actions with another, given the movements of the shared medium in which they are working? Or, does this collective dimension involve collaborations across a larger range of roles and agencies altogether, including but not limited to non-aeolian aspects of the weather, at a regional or even global scale?

References

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

Ingold, Tim. *The Life of Lines*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

3. *Tvisongur*, made in 2012 by Lukas Kühne.