

About Ken Gregory's *wind coil sound flow* By Curtis Collins

The kite occupies a strange place in human history as it has served military, scientific and pure entertainment functions for thousands of years. A combination of simple aerodynamic know-how and easily accessible materials has resulted in the universal transmission of the kite. And yet it has rarely served a purpose within a primarily artistic context; that is until now via Ken Gregory. "My installation and performance work is centred around the exploration of the relationship between technology and humans."

Gregory is a Winnipeg-based artist whose multidisciplinary practice over the past twenty years has encompassed sound, performance, music, sculpture and installation. Much of his art charts a curious ground between aesthetic pursuit and seemingly impractical invention, as is the case with one of his most celebrated works *12 Bells*, which the National Gallery of Canada purchased in 2005. The twelve fire alarm bells featured in this piece are suspended from the ceiling by wires and activated by heat sensors creating an ever changing soundscape. Over the past few years Ken Gregory has become captivated by the kite's audio-visual possibilities, as witnessed in his work for a number of recent residencies from Windsor, Ontario to New Plymouth, New Zealand. Gregory has focused his investigation on both the structure of the kite and its potential to create sound, thus bringing forward a number of aspects from this object's long and storied history.

The flying of kites dates back over two thousand years to ancient China as they were used for both military and recreational purposes. Soldiers were suspended from massive kites to observe approaching armies. During the ensuing spread of this technology throughout Asia a number of fascinating circumstances occur. For example in Japan an Edo period government directive attempted to ban kites because their use was thought to make people unmindful of work. Paintings from India produced in the 1500s depict men using such simple aerodynamic devices to drop notes to lovers held in seclusion.

Gregory's *Kite Song 1*, a five minute track produced in 2007 and available on www.cheapmeat.net, offers listeners an example of the supernatural sounds generated by such ancient technology. In the lead up to the production of this track the artist described the potential for kite audio as follows: "Simply, while the kite is in flight, the tow line vibrates at different frequencies induced by the various constantly changing wind intensities which can be heard as whistles or hums at very low levels. The basic idea is to experiment with acoustic and electronic amplification systems so that these sounds can be heard by the naked ear." In essence Gregory brings to the listener and viewer (via his interpretive inventions) a fantastic sense of imagination as he seeks to answer extraordinary questions. What is the sound of kite as it rises into the sky? How can one reproduce the sound of the wind?

Marco Polo is credited with bringing stories of kites back from Asia to Europe in the 13th century. By the 18th century Europeans had begun to employ kites as tools for scientific research. In North America the tale of Benjamin Franklin's kite flying experiment during a lightning storm to determine the nature of static electricity is legendary. Throughout World War I kites took on tactical importance among the British, French, Italian and Russian armies as signaling and surveillance devices. The advent of the airplane rendered the kite obsolete within such military and scientific contexts. It has since served principally as an object of endless entertainment.

And yet Ken Gregory is able to conceive a completely new function for the kite in his effort to bring it into the realm of installation-performance art. In Montreal articule has teamed up with the city's annual Elektra festival of media arts to present this innovative Winnipeg artist's work. Gregory installation is intended to manipulate the sounds of his kite recordings mentioned earlier, while making a visual indication of their aerodynamic origin. It consists of three resonators made of plastic, wood, metal and paper which look to kite construction methods for their form. They range in diameter from approximately six to two feet and are affixed to a wooden structure that rises to the gallery's ceiling. This apparatus is then linked to piano wires wrapped by electromagnetic coils that are attached to an amplifier and compact disc player hidden in a low profile box mounted on the floor. The recorded sounds run along the distance of the wires to the resonators which fill the room with gentle whistles and hums. Viewers-listeners thus enter a space which makes both oblique audio and visual references to the kite, however more importantly for Gregory *wind coil sound flow* brings back the sense of "play" to art.

This text is part of a writing series by members of the gallery, reflecting on the works presented during articule's 2008-2009 programming season. Curtis Collins' text has been produced for Ken Gregory's exhibition *wind coil sound flow*, presented from April 3 to May 10, 2009, in collaboration with Elektra Festival, and is also available as a pdf on the gallery's web site.

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262 Fairmount O. Montréal (QC) H2V 2G3 T 514 842 9686 info@articule.org www.articule.org

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