

## An Artist Who Channels Her Anger Into Pie Charts

Christine Sun Kim discusses her experimental, sensory-rich process — and her favorite shoes to wear in the studio.



The artist Christine Sun Kim in her Berlin apartment. Robert Rieger

By [Anna Furman](#)

May 21, 2019



Six years ago, the California-born artist Christine Sun Kim, 39, moved from New York City’s Chinatown to Berlin. “I fell in love,” she explains. Her eyes widen and brows lift as she signs, “I’m actually not a big fan of making these big moves for love. But it worked out really well for me.” After earning two M.F.A.s — from the School of Visual Arts and Bard College — and finding a foothold in New York, it was time to find a different way to practice.

In transgressive textual drawings, videos and participatory performances, Kim visualizes sounds and distills spoken language into clever new forms. She was selected for the 2013 MoMA show “Soundings,” the museum’s first exhibition dedicated to sound art, and she has become known for her powerful works that demonstrate the possibilities of sound as an artistic medium (her 2015 TED Talk about the similarities between music and sign language currently has over one and a half million views). A series of her large-format charcoal drawings, which explore navigating the hearing world as a deaf person, are now on view at the 79th Whitney Biennial in New York. The six works pair depictions of varying mathematical angles with correlative, rage-inducing encounters that are both

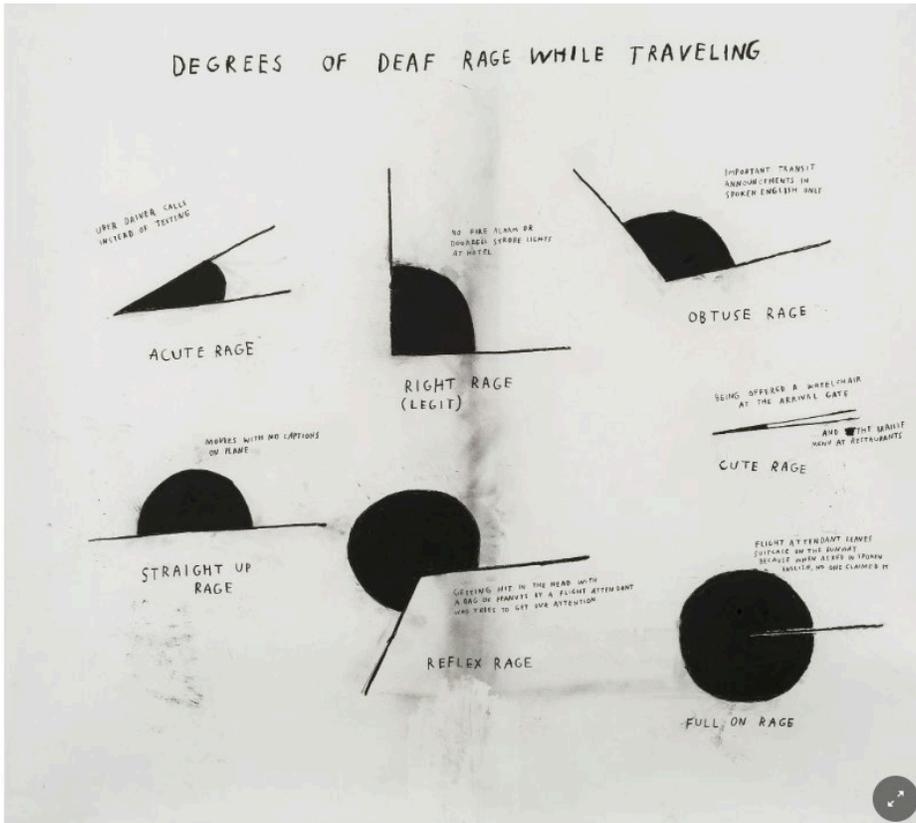
broadly applicable — “being given a Braille menu at a restaurant” or “offered a wheelchair at an airport” — and painfully specific to her experience — “curators who think it’s fair to split my fee with interpreters.” After a controversy-laden 2017 show, this year’s biennial, curated by Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley, highlights the most diverse group of artists yet; the majority of the 75 participants are people of color, and two-thirds are women. In her works in the exhibition, Kim explores her various identities — as Korean-American, as a new mother and as a deaf artist — taking the maxim “the personal is political” to a new level.



Inspired by meme formats, the artist creates pie charts that cleverly address different types of discrimination she faces as a deaf person. Here, she offers answers to questions like “Why does your hearing partner sign?” and “Why do you watch shows with closed captions?” Robert Rieger



A tattoo on Kim’s arm spells out A-B-C. “I saw a deaf vlogger showing off his ABC tattoo in a video,” she explained. In the video, he said it stood for “always be cool.” Robert Rieger



Christine Sun Kim’s “Degrees of Deaf Rage While Traveling” (2018). Robert Rieger

Kim lives with her husband, the conceptual artist Thomas Mader, and their daughter in a railroad-style apartment with parquet flooring in Wedding, a northern Berlin neighborhood known for its Weimar-era architecture and countless doner kebab stands. “I’ve always wanted a live-work situation,” she says. “And it’s something I actually could find in Berlin.” Channeling her experiences into images of geometric angles, musical notes and meme-like pie charts, Kim playfully combines different sign systems to create what she calls a “common language that all people can connect to.” Sitting at a desk in her studio, across a small foyer from her apartment, and wearing her signature jet black lipstick, Kim answered T’s Artist’s Questionnaire in American Sign Language with an interpreter.

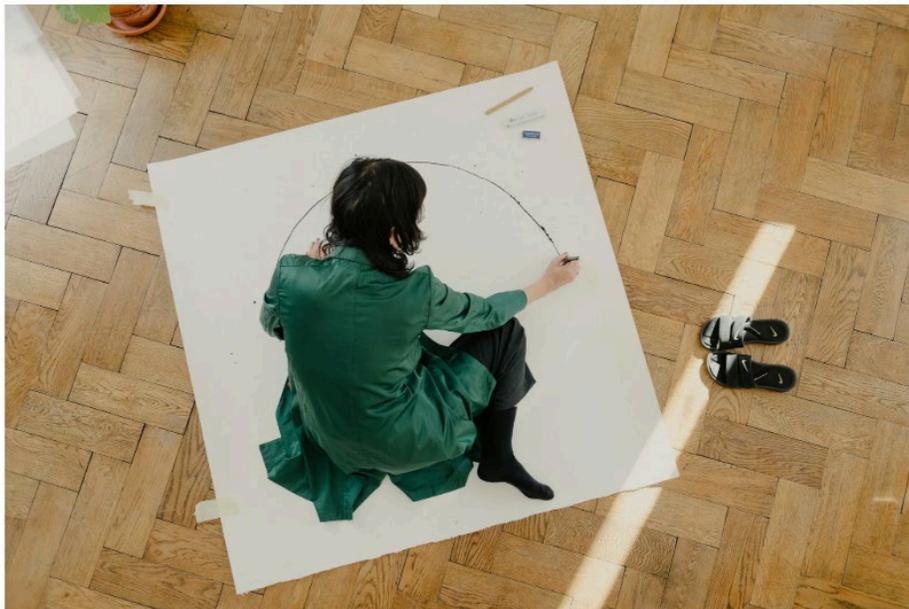
### **What is your day like? How much do you sleep, and what’s your work schedule like?**

I’ve read articles that are like: “successful artists have routines, and that’s the secret.” I don’t. My schedule is chaotic, partially because I have a baby. She’s about to turn 2, and she’s got her own schedule that I adhere to. I have to use those gaps to make my work; I have these periods of crunch time when I really have to go, go, go and get things done.

And my sleep schedule kind of depends on Netflix. If there’s a really good movie or series that I want to watch, I might only get six hours of sleep a night, but if there’s nothing good on Netflix, I might get eight hours. I know science says you should have eight hours of sleep a night, but quite frankly, my body loves a 12-hour sleep session.

### **How many hours of creative work do you think you do in a day?**

I feel like it’s always zero. I know I’m doing the opposite of that, but I’m not really sure how. Sometimes I’m online for a while or I’m talking to somebody — and all of that contributes to my creative process.



The artist draws an arc on paper to represent the American Sign Language gesture for “day.”  
Robert Rieger

### **What do you usually wear when you work?**

Pajamas. I also really love a good hotel slipper. I’ve got a whole stash. I have a new habit where I grab slippers off an airplane or in a hotel.

### **Is there a meal you eat on repeat when you're working?**

I'm not that good of a cook. My partner is the cook. And I'm lucky for this. He'll usually leave some leftovers on the stove. If he's not around, I do love a good pretzel with cheese or kimchi or butter or broccoli sprouts. And a lot of coffee.

### **What's the first piece of art you ever made?**

A drawing of Jesus or a rainbow. I went to church a lot growing up. I was a high-energy kid, so sometimes my mom would try to distract me by drawing some pumpkins on a napkin, and then I would fill in the pumpkin's face — adding eyes or a nose or mouth.

### **What's the first work you ever sold? For how much?**

My ex-boyfriend's father bought my first piece for \$500. It was when I was 22, in my first grad school program. It was a decent sized painting of my dog.



Kim's studio is adjacent to her home, which gives her the flexibility to take care of her 2-year-old daughter between periods of work. Robert Rieger

### **When you start a new piece, where do you begin? What's the first step?**

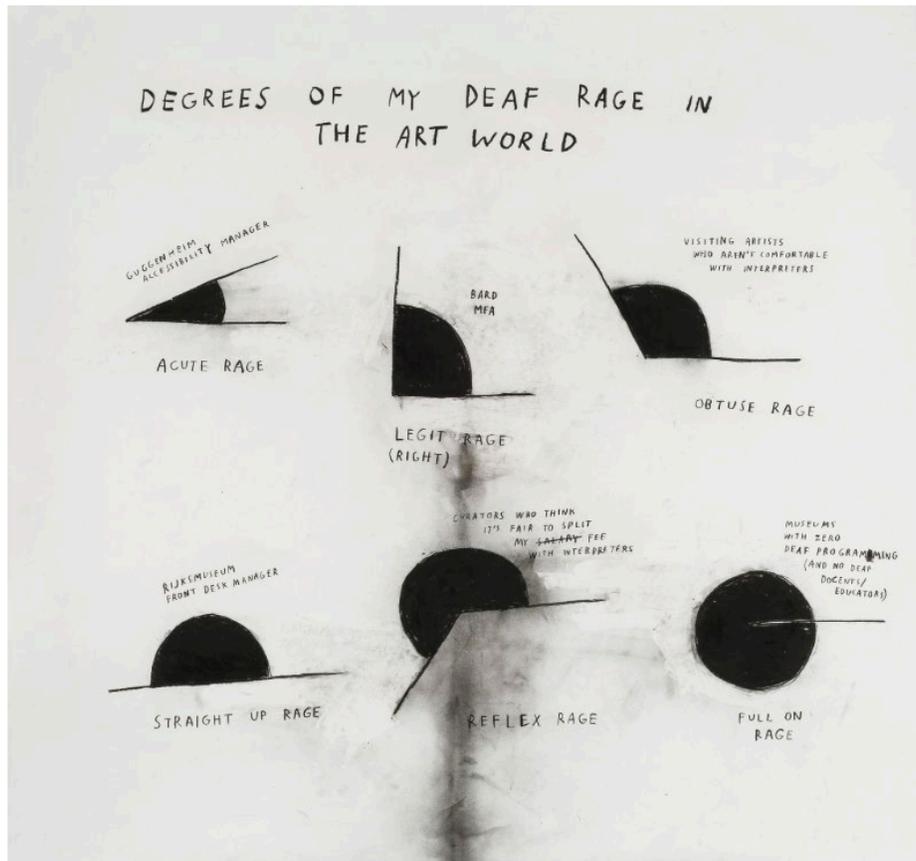
I usually have periods of putzing around. My partner is an artist himself and we're really good sounding boards for each other. It's not until I have one solid idea that I can get to work on it. One idea for a drawing turns itself into a series of drawings — or a series of answers. For example, the deaf rage and the angle drawings turned into pie charts.

### **How do you know when you're done with a piece?**

When I'm done documenting it, through video or a photograph. That's how I make things official. Then I can put the thing aside, and move on to the next one. I need to have structure; without it I'm just lost. The more structure I have, the more I can move on and move forward.

### **How many assistants do you have?**

I have zero. And I need one!



Christine Sun Kim's "Degrees of My Deaf Rage in The Art World" (2018).  
 Courtesy of White Space Beijing and Yang Hao 杨昊



A drawing by the artist based on a combination of the letters L, L and Y in American Sign Language to mean "I love you." In March, the piece was installed on pay phones throughout New York City, as part of the initiative "Art in Ad Places." Robert Rieger



The last stage of Kim's process involves documenting her work by making a video or taking photographs. "That's how I make things official," she says. "Then I can put the thing aside, and move on to the next one. I need to have structure; without it I'm just lost." Robert Rieger

## When did you first feel comfortable saying you're a professional artist?

When people started paying me to speak at colleges, give talks about my work and to perform — that's when I felt legit. Like in 2013, I gave a talk at MoMA for the sound exhibition "Soundings."

**What's your worst habit?**

Taking forever to answer long emails. When I see that long body of text, I just — can't. I have emails that I haven't responded to for a year.

**What are you reading right now?**

Maggie Nelson's "The Art of Cruelty" and W.E.B. Du Bois's "Data Portraits: Visualizing Black America." I'm really into depictions of data. Du Bois's book is a series of hand drawings and data graphs that visualize America. It's just beautiful.

**What embarrasses you?**

When I'm not being voiced properly.

**What's the weirdest object in your studio?**

My tax documents. I just think they're so dumb. Like, "Why are you there?"

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

The Whitney Biennial is on view May 17 through September 22, 2019, at The Whitney Museum of American Art, 99 Gansevoort Street, New York.

Furman, Anna. "An Artist Who Channels Her Anger Into Pie Charts,"  
*The New York Times Style Magazine*, May 21, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/21/t-magazine/christine-sun-kim-artist.html>



WHITNEY BIENNIAL | MAY 14, 2019

## The New Whitney Biennial Made Me See Art History in a New Way

By Jerry Saltz



Photo: Courtesy the artist; Anton Kern Gallery, New York; and Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects / © Nicole Eisenman

First, massive congratulations to the Whitney. Even with long, flat patches of overly well-behaved work, a strange visual monotony that makes this show predictable (the prior iteration was more optically alive), generally weak painting, and collage and assemblage far too beholden to Robert Rauschenberg, this Biennial has as many as 15 standouts — which, judging by past versions, is a lot! Breakthroughs abound. Over half of the 75 participants are women, and over half are artists of color. Amen. Skeptics and cynics who say these demographics are achieved by good little humanist curators checking boxes to show how woke they are will be thrilled to learn what has always been obvious: Having an exhibition reflect the world this way makes the show better. This Biennial’s spacious installations, which unfold easily and bloom into almost solo presentations that then strike up interesting conversations with nearby work, makes it better still.

The show is also young. Of the 75 artists, almost 75 percent are under 40; 20 of them are under 33. The curators, Rujeko Hockley and Jane Panetta, are 35 and 46, respectively. Together, they have brought to boil an idea that’s been bubbling in front of us for a long time: Subject matter is as important a formal feature of art as form itself as a primary carrier of change and newness. My wife, Roberta Smith, boils it down to “Subject matter is the new form, good and bad.” Look carefully at Carissa Rodriguez’s handsome silent film of tony interiors and sculptures by Constantin Brancusi as it morphs into a filmic Louise Lawler exploration of various rich collectors who own editions of the same Sherrie Levine–appropriated Brancusi sculpture; *The Maid*, as the work is titled, becomes riveting in its insinuation of cookie-cutter collector taste and what goes into maintaining this system of wealth and accumulation. Elle Pérez’s small color photograph of a person with black eyes showing a red scar on their neck spotlights someone who has just had their Adam’s apple removed in sex-reassignment surgery. And I have to say that *White Noise*, *American Prayer Rug* — a large, seemingly abstract wool-and-cotton work by Nicholas Galanin,

an artist of Tlingit/Aleut and non-Native ancestry — nails the malign aberrations of what’s happening with whiteness in America as well as what all information turns into right now, as the ice near Galanin’s Alaska melts. This piece could fly over the White House. Over and over, subject matter like this melds with structure, surface, and form in ways that require very little explanation.

Yet for a Biennial with so much diversity in *who* is being shown, there’s an enervating lack of formal innovation, as if the curators couldn’t take those kinds of formal chances. As a result, sometimes a whole room fizzles. A number of inclusions are so generic and proper they become placeholders. Often, though, formally non-daring works breathe quiet fire and seethe. While we used to believe art history was a progression of one ism and style to the next, artists are now inhabiting the beautiful ruins of the art of the past 125 years — not to mention the glories of 50 centuries of art before that — and are making new things with old tropes. They dance on teleology’s grave, using the canon and previous art willy-nilly as material, fodder, form, information, and tools to make their own work. Call it “sustainable aesthetics.” This isn’t being done in coolly self-conscious or ironic postmodern ways, and it isn’t just pastiche that comments on or criticizes earlier art. It’s not art meant as an illustration of theory or as aesthetic gamesmanship only. It may even signal a thankful waning of the 50-year fetishization of Duchamp and Warhol (one can only hope). Artists’ free-ranging in the fabulous scrap heap of visual culture isn’t new; what’s new here is the passionate embrace of processes they’re using to embed new subjects into known genres, styles, and techniques. This points beyond the Biennial to a wider path forward and away from toeing the line of progress.

Thus all the formal echoes of Rauschenberg and the dematerializing of the art object of post-minimalist sculpture; Jessica Stockholder and Cady Noland’s notions of object-based installation; and numerous references to Pictures artists like Gretchen Bender, Sherrie Levine, and Cindy Sherman. There are even a couple of archaic tool-makers to push the clock all the way back. Video and film follow closely in either classic documentary style or the fictive tropes of Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, Laura Poitras, Steve McQueen, and many others. When the art here works, it isn’t 95 percent reliant on obscurant wall labels. It’s enough that I left this Biennial hopeful about seeing new ideas of the poetic and subjective.

But here’s a caveat: Almost everything in this show is incredibly sincere, felt, sympathetic, and empathetic and tries to illuminate important things.

The organizers place a kind of political and physical governor on the show. Nothing here will offend. Political bona fides are all in order. This makes the show feel a little locked in, careful, and polite, as though the curators had an idea of what they were looking for and then went and found it. Happily, older artists like Diane Simpson, 84; Nicole Eisenman, 54; Simone Leigh, 52; and Wangechi Mutu, 46 — all makers of powerful, almost ancient or ritualistic figurative forms fashioned from clay, wood, straw, and other materials — are given pride of place and preside over the show like elders.\*

The earnestness does have upside, though. Nearly everything here is conspicuously handmade, pieced together with wire and tape. Humble materials predominate (meshes, fabric, beads, etc.), and layered busywork is everywhere, which means the two genuine so-called outsiders really fit in: Marlon Mullen, with his blazing paintings of *Art in America* covers, and Joe Minter, 76, a maker of twisted-metal sculptures and the builder in Birmingham, Alabama, of the giant *African Village in America*. The whole show is a hive of handsy art, the handsy Biennial. There’s a real sense of the artist’s studio throughout. Additionally, nothing here is overproduced or shiny or makes a spectacle of itself. There are none of the visual pows of the previous Biennial’s Samara Golden, Rafa Esparza, Jessi Reaves, Anicka Yi, Pope.L, or Raúl de Nieves.

Well, except for one: The closest thing to a showstopper is Eisenman’s huge outdoor sculpture of a fantastical Hieronymous Boschian procession of oversize Fellini-esque figures, including a severed blinded head with eye piercings and a farting man pulled along on a cart. It’s all the chaos of Trumpism and the End of the American Empire. (It deserves a permanent public home. Maybe Central Park?)

All the photography is strong. This seems to come almost out of nowhere, as it hasn't been the case for a while at the Biennial. Memorable is the documenting of the black and white American working class by Curran Hatleberg, which feels connected to previous Biennial standouts Alec Soth, Zoe Strauss, and Oto Gillen and almost seems Pulitzer-worthy. Pérez's pictures of their gender surgery remind us that Catherine Opie's strongest work initially appeared in the storied 1993 Biennial. John Edmonds employs staged photographs of black figures posed with African objects to take back this purloined field of the modernist fetishizing of black bodies. Heji Shin does the same with mother-and-child photos, giving us close-ups of babies' heads crowning in the act of birth. Lucas Blalock's photo mash-ups remain as knotty as ever, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya makes sexually aware pictures that project quietly complicated agency. Todd Gray's collaged pictures remind one of 1980s artists like Alan Belcher, Anne Doran, and Sarah Charlesworth but with a personal urgency that seems to come from the artist having once been Michael Jackson's official photographer; little snippets of these pictures are included here.

The biggest overall weakness of this Biennial is painting. While I love Brian Belott's work, and Janiva Ellis and Pat Phillips are okay, the rest is generic. This is a big missed opportunity that sadly neglects the extraordinary liveliness now afoot in the medium. What is it about curators these days that makes them unsure of or oddly averse to or put off by painting's much older, more chemical-based psychic alchemies? This academic prejudice needs to end.

As with any group show like this, the best strategy is to sort out what you don't like and focus on what might be here for you. Right off the fifth-floor elevator, the show touts its credentials in the form of Kota Ezawa's lyrical animated *National Anthem*, assembled by rephotographing his watercolors of NFL footage of Colin Kaepernick kneeling in mournful observation of the national anthem. Seeing these images stripped of all the bile projected on Kaepernick (he never played again) and with only the soft strains of the anthem as witness, viewers are left with how extraordinarily brave this moment was.

More generic still but just as riveting is Alexandra Bell's 20-part *Friday, April 28, 1989*. Using an almost identical strategy to Charlesworth's *Movie-Television-News-History, June 21, 1979*, Bell redacts parts of pages from New York *Daily News* coverage of the five Central Park "rapists," all young men of color who were found guilty of brutally raping and murdering a white woman, imprisoned, and then exonerated of the crime and released. See the grotesques of white America describing the boys as a "wolf pack" and "animals" who should be "put to death." Donald Trump's full-page ad placed in all New York newspapers on May 1, 1989, is here too. It called on the courts to revise the law so these minors could be put to death. Trump said, "I hate these people ... maybe hate is what we need if we're gonna get something done." All of this has been coming for a long time, and now it's here.

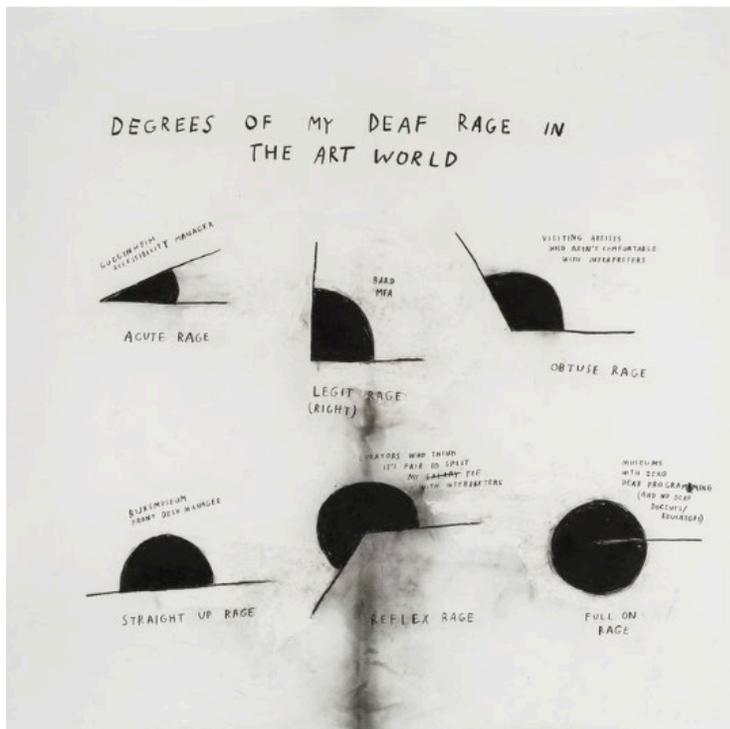


Photo: Courtesy the artist and White Space, Beijing

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If you want another kind of blasting indictment, look no further than Christine Sun Kim's affecting six-part exploration of her own "deaf rage." Formally, the work resembles large-scale

Robert Smithson, Mel Bochner, or Richard Serra charcoal drawings, but Kim uses her graphs and words to record degrees of her fury — from “acute rage” to “legit rage” to “full on rage” — at there being no interpreters at meetings and fake interpreters on TV, at her family not learning sign language, at fast-food cashiers, at airplane movies without captions, at Uber drivers’ calling rather than texting, and so much more that your heart will break. It makes you want a requirement forcing all public schools to teach students at least 150 words of sign language.

A shamanic force is put out by a number of artists, among them Tiona Nekkia McClodden with her intense multimedia arrangement of cases with talismanlike tools made from a tree she cut



Photo: Courtesy of Laura Ortman

down and videos of the artist at work at forges. She’s on some sort of mission.

If you want to be transported to another dimension, behold Laura Ortman’s mesmerizing six-minute video of her violin performance in the New Mexico woods with appearances by the dancer Jock Soto. Nearby, be held in suspension by Ellie Ga’s slideshowlike presentation tracking tens of millions of objects adrift in our oceans. At first, I thought Brendan Fernandes’s minimalistic black jungle gym with dancers moving about it would be just generic modern dance until two of the dancers locked eyes with me and I was caught in some sort of paraxualized movement enacted on various S&M-like devices. Meanwhile, Daniel Lind-Ramos fashions large sculptural altars and spirit beings from bamboo, palm branches, burlap, and much more to perhaps watch over his destroyed native Puerto Rico. Ilana Harris-Babou’s three-part delving into the insidious hidden colonialisms of Restoration Hardware should bring you full circle to Kim’s incredulity. And Josh Kline only underscores this with his photographs of things like the U.S. Capitol, the flag, and the Twitter insignia encased in frames with water forever streaming in. All these are very subtle blast furnaces of indictment.

The culminating point and metaphorical backdrop of the whole show is the Forensic Architecture collective’s devastating video incrimination of Warren B. Kanders, the Whitney’s own vice-chairman and the owner of Defense Technology — a huge company that manufactures combat direction systems, chemical munitions, open-tip bullets, and tear gas (the last of which was fired at immigrants crossing the California border at Tijuana on November 25, 2018). Keep in mind that some of these chemical weapons are banned by international treaties for use during wartime but are generally used against a country’s own citizens for “crowd control.” Sick yet?

Many voices have publicly called for Kanders to resign, including 95 Whitney staff members, scores of Biennial artists, and many more academics — these last are often associated with or employed by the same wealthy institutions funded by Kanders and his ilk. It’s time to think about toxic philanthropy and how many of our beloved institutions are supported by fortunes

like these. After all, you need look only at the Museum of Modern Art's board to find it filled with corporate raiders, billionaires, a stock big shot whom the U.S. government found guilty of insider trading and fined \$1.8 billion, a Sotheby's senior vice-president (hello, conflict of interest), another investor guilty of selling more than \$600 million in stock before the company went bankrupt, a real-estate titan who has continually sold the museum short on building deals, and others who extract fortunes from fossil fuels, oil and gas fields, pharmaceuticals, gentrifying real-estate developers, and investment and wealth-management firms, mutual funds, and hedge funds (including Lehman Brothers) that led directly to the worldwide financial collapse of 2008. Back then, I used to recoil at the sight of a former MoMA curator regularly shepherding Rupert Murdoch's then-wife to glamorous museum events. Many museums are this deep in the morally corrupt philanthropic mud.

Before I watched Forensic Architecture's video, I felt that a systemic cross-institutional conversation was essential and that focusing on Kanders might even be a distraction from that conversation. But the video changed all that for me. Co-directed by Laura Poitras and flatly narrated by David Byrne, this 11-minute collaborative work of artists, filmmakers, and data analysts deploys maps, diagrams, digital animation, simple effects, found footage, and the examination of 5,000 images of worldwide protests identifying numerous instances in which Safariland tear gas was deployed. Titled *Triple Chaser* after the three-chambered canisters that deliver the gas and allow for an extended "approximate burn time of 20 to 30 seconds," the video effectively skewers Kanders and his Safariland company as being implicated in the killing and maiming devices used in Turkey, where over 130,000 canisters were fired into crowds, and in Gaza, where 154 Palestinian protesters were killed, including 34 children.

The previous Biennial initiated an important conversation over a painting of Emmett Till that ended with the art world being much better for it. It's time to have this conversation about Kanders. In public. I walked into that darkened screening room thinking that calling for scalps wasn't an answer. I left thinking, *This guy has to fucking resign. Now!* Think of Kanders like a Harvey Weinstein: He's just one of very many offensive philanthropists; get rid of him and the rest might start to fall. It's true that if scores of trustees are required to meet agreed-on institutional philanthropic regulations, then museum programs, staff, restoration, and upkeep will be affected across the board. Yet look at the moral costs of giving all this an ethical pass. Perhaps Kanders's exit might trigger all institutions to draw up guidelines. And if you're still not sure how deluded some of these billionaires can be, consider Kanders's quote shown at the beginning of the film: "While my company and the museum have distinct missions, both are important contributors to our society." Loss of millions notwithstanding, this is a train museums should want to get off of.

Props to the Whitney for showcasing this work, which is sure to come down on them like a ton of bricks. (The museum was completely aware of and endorses the inclusion.) For the second Biennial in a row, the Whitney is showing us that museums are places to have difficult conversations in an offensive world and to raise issues that aren't polite or easy. My profound hope is that the rest of the artists in this important show aren't eclipsed again by the focus on one object and one issue. See this Biennial and give it time, the same kind of careful time that seems to have gone into the work in it, its generous installation, and the telling aesthetics within the show. See change happening. Then help make it happen.

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ART REVIEW

## Whitney Biennial Review: Still Protesting, but to What End?

The exhibition is filled with work expressing political and social grievances, but feels like it may be preaching to the converted.



Agustina Woodgate's 'National Times' (2016/2019) installation at the Biennial includes 40 analog 'slave clocks' PHOTO: JUSTIN LANE/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

*By Peter Plagens*

May 15, 2019 5:54 p.m. ET

*New York*

The latest Whitney Biennial's online guide features audio of many of the 75 individual artists and collectives talking about their work. Given the emphasis by curators Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley on emerging artists and first-time Biennial participants, and the culture's current hyper-politicized zeitgeist, it's not surprising that the 2019 edition of the American art world's most-argued-about event could well be the greatest—and most superbly installed—graduate thesis group show ever.

The above isn't as snarky as it sounds. It doesn't have much to do with the (to invoke the horribly out-of-fashion word favored by the late great art critic Clement Greenberg) *quality* of the art on view, which for such a rampantly expressionist ensemble is quite professional overall, even slick. It has more to do with veritable degree candidates answering an art professor who asks, "What's this piece all about,

anyway?” Agustina Woodgate, for example, says that she purchased and employed 40 big, round, analog “slave clocks” for her whole-room installation “National Times” (2016/2019) “because of the way they are named. I was shocked to find out that this terminology is being used so freely in the technology industry.”

The pervasiveness of artists’ explanations derives from the fact that the exhibition—although it comes nowhere near the *cri de coeur* of the 1993 Biennial in which Daniel J. Martinez proffered proof-of-admission buttons saying “I Can’t Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White”—consists largely of work expressing political and social grievances against racism, sexism, homophobia and, in what is sure to be one of the most talked-about works in show, weapons profiteering.



Kota Ezawa's 'National Anthem (Buffalo Bills)' is included in his video at the Whitney PHOTO: KOTA EZAWA/HAINES GALLERY, SAN FRANCISCO

Forensic Architecture calls itself “a research agency” that “undertake[s] advanced spatial and media investigations into cases of human rights violations.” It’s based at Goldsmiths, an arts and design part of the University of London, which gives it enough art credibility to qualify for the Biennial, and presumably enough Americans on its team to get it under the Whitney’s national umbrella. The agency’s main contribution to the Biennial is an 11-minute film, “Triple Chaser” (2019), concerning the use on civilian protesters of the eponymous tear-gas canister. The controversy re the Whitney is that the canister is manufactured under the aegis of the Safariland Group (the name a rhetorical crime in itself), whose CEO and majority stockholder is Warren B. Kanders, a vice chairman of the Whitney’s board of trustees.

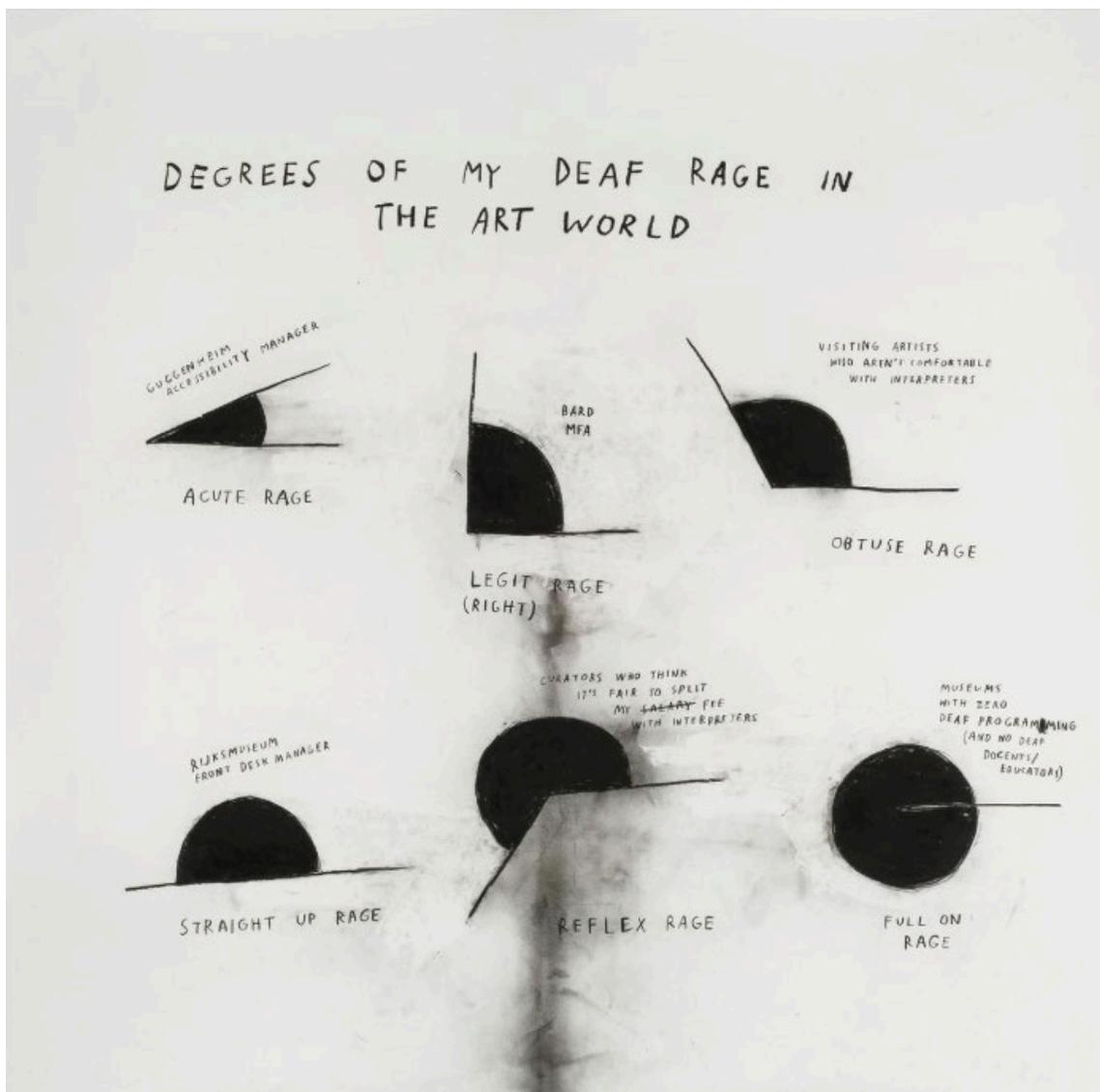
The film's explanation of the software used to ferret out the source of these weapons is fascinating, but "Triple Chaser" is too polished to constitute a full-fledged attack on the museum-military-industrial complex. With a voiceover by David Byrne, it demonstrates via sophisticated computer identification technology the profligate and cruel use of Triple Chasers, as well as some particularly deadly bullets made by another Kanders-involved entity. Mr. Kanders's membership on the board led about two-thirds of the Biennial's artists to demand his resignation from it, and one artist to withdraw from the exhibition.



Eddie Arroyo's '5825 NE 2nd Ave., Miami, FL 33137' (2016) PHOTO: EDDIE ARROYO/SPINELLO PROJECTS, MIAMI

Other works of protest include Kota Ezawa's "National Anthem" (2018), a large projection of softly animated watercolors concerning professional football player Colin Kaepernick's kneeling during the customary pregame "Star-Spangled Banner"; Christine Sun Kim's adroitly semi-messy, semi-funny diagram drawings displaying the "deaf rage" she feels about the insensitivity of the hearing world; and Pat Phillips's giant mural, "Untitled (Don't Tread on Me)" (2019), which is about guns, racism and yahoo conservatism down in Louisiana, where the U.K.-born artist now lives.

In this, the first Biennial whose organization and fruition have taken place entirely since Donald Trump became president, the majority of artists have a beef, express or implied, of one sort or another. Nothing wrong with that, but it does raise the perennial question of whether those in the cutting-edge precincts of the art world are fecklessly preaching to the converted, and whether the art world—more or less aligned with the left—is doing anything to actually move the sociopolitical needle in a progressive direction.



Christine Sun Kim's 'Degrees of My Deaf Rage in the Art World' (2018) PHOTO: CHRISTINE SUN KIM/WHITE SPACE, BEIJING

The Biennial's elegant anger (the former mitigating the latter, and the latter blunting the former) is both capped and contradicted by Nicole Eisenman's morbidly hilarious, inchoate bleat, "Procession" (2019)—a huge sculptural parade of 10 grotesque figures, trudging or riding or being carried along, installed outdoors on a Whitney roof. A cart in this mutant parade sports a bumper sticker saying "HOW'S MY SCULPTING? CALL 1-800-EAT-SHIT." The work is probably best seen, as it was during the press preview, in a cold, drizzling rain.

There are, of course, notable exceptions to the show's general vibe of a raised fist in an opera glove. One occupies a whole first-floor lobby gallery devoted to the stately sculpture (abstract, albeit with allusions to 1930s clothing and architecture) of the Chicago artist Diane Simpson. At 88, she's the show's most senior participant. The tender, unpretentious and modestly scaled paintings of Eddie Arroyo are another. In sequence, they show the poignant metamorphosis from vibrancy to desolation to possible renewal of a neighborhood café in Miami's Little Haiti district.



Nicole Eisenman's 'The General' (2018) is included as part of her larger 'Procession' (2019) work PHOTO: NICOLE EISENMAN/SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS

Perhaps the art of Ms. Simpson and Mr. Arroyo are what the curators had in mind when they state in the press materials, “While we might have expected to find work that was more strident in tone given the difficulties and instabilities of the times we are living in, the art we encountered continues to put forth a deliberate sense of forward-looking optimism.” In a few examples, yes. More would have been better.

—*Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.*

Plagens, Peter. “Whitney Biennial Review: Still Protesting, but to What End?,”  
*The Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 2019.

## ARTNEWS

MARKET — NEWS

## L.A.'s François Ghebaly Gallery Now Represents Christine Sun Kim

BY Maximiliano Durón POSTED 05/21/19 4:41 PM

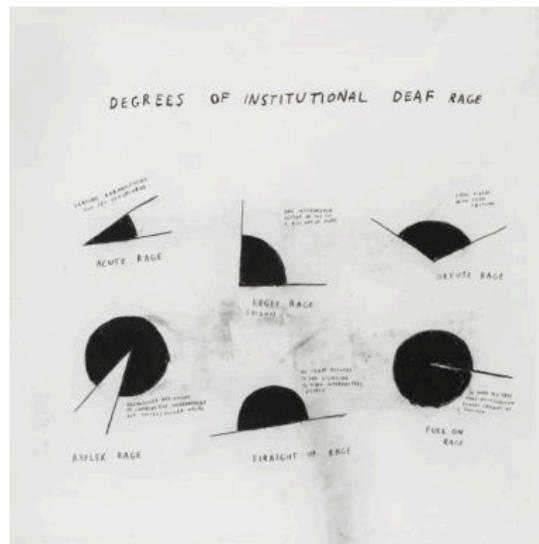
With the Whitney Biennial garnering attention after opening last week, one artist in the exhibition has new gallery representation: Christine Sun Kim. The California-born, Berlin-based artist will now be part of the stable of François Ghebaly in Los Angeles, which mounted a solo show of her work last year.

Kim is known for art that engages ways in which sound relates to silence and vice versa, particularly in relation to privileges shared among hearing people. Kim is pre-lingually deaf, and her work has manifested in various media, including performance, video, writing, technology, and drawing.

Her inclusion in the Whitney Biennial is a homecoming of sorts since she worked at the museum for more than a decade to help to develop American Sign Language programming. Her works in the [exhibition](#), all of which carry variations of the title “Degrees of Deaf Rage,” chronicle instances in which Kim has felt anger, and they are embedded with a sense of wry humor as she depicts the extent of her rage—“legit” (a right angle), “straight up” (180 degrees), “full on” (a circle).

In a [2015 interview](#) with *ARTnews*, Kim said that her practice is in part about “unlearning sound etiquette.” She added, “I’m trying to unlearn what I’ve been taught by others and trying to find my own definition of both sound and silence.”

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Christine Sun Kim, *Degrees of Institutional Deaf Rage*, 2019, charcoal and oil pastel on paper.

COURTESY THE ARTST AND FRANÇOIS GHEBALY

Durón, Maximiliano. “L.A.’s François Ghebaly Gallery Now Represents Christine Sun Kim,” *Artnews*, May 21, 2019.

<http://www.artnews.com/2019/05/21/francois-ghebaly-gallery-represents-christine-sun-kim/>

## CHRISTINE SUN KIM

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Article by Emily Watlington, Studio Visit Photos by Ériver Hijano // Feb. 08, 2019

When I visited Christine Sun Kim's studio, there was a large charcoal drawing on the wall that read "WHY MY HEARING PARENTS SIGN", above a pie chart she was getting ready to fill in. They're a response to, in Kim's words, "people being curious about how things run in my life". She's decided to explain it to them. I thought the charts succinctly summarized Kim's work, which involves sound and communication (with her family, with those curious about her), and also lots of intimacy. There's the trust involved in allowing someone else to be her American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter or literal "voice" when she gives artist talks, or how and why her partner and baby are learning sign language, or Deaf communities. (And yes, that's with a capital 'D,' used to denote a cultural group, kind of like "French.").



Take her video *Classified Digits* (2016), currently on view at Albright Knox and made with her partner, Thomas Mader. Mader laces his hands through her armpits in order to sign as if his arms, and the words they signal, were hers; Kim layers the meaning of his gestures with facial expressions. Mader is an ASL learner; Kim was born Deaf. It's abundantly clear that theirs is a relationship of mutual care and collaboration, and that they "get" each other enough to interpret one another's gestures.

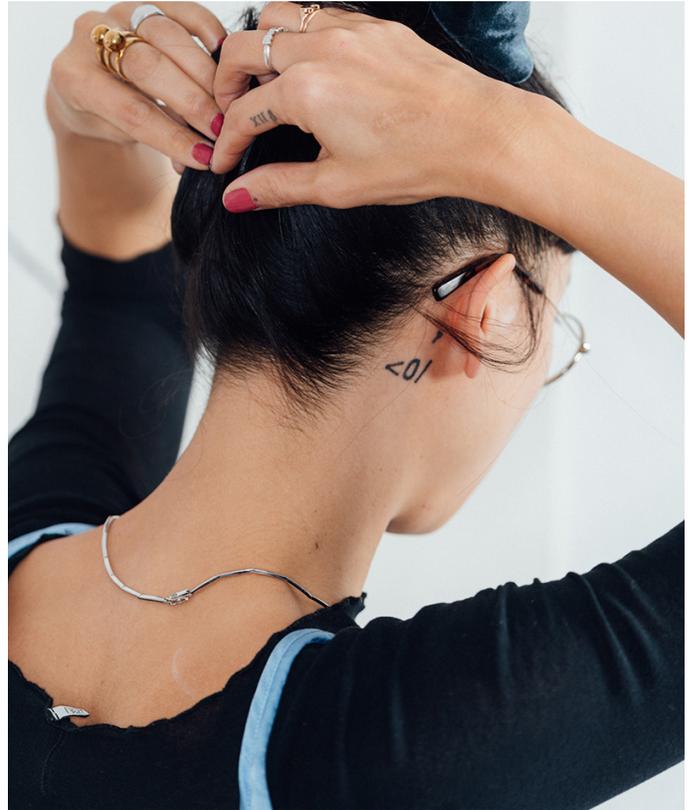
This idea of "getting" someone enough to communicate with or on behalf of them is a persistent theme in Kim's art and life, and also when she gives talks. She told me, for instance, that institutions often assume that "one local interpreter can do the job, but I prefer to work with the ones I've worked with in the past. They know my practice very well, know how to voice with my personality, etc." There's much more to ASL than hand movements: there's lots of subtlety and personality embedded elsewhere, like in facial expressions. This sort of personal flare is captured in Kim's recent project *Too Much Future*, a billboard mounted by the Whitney Museum and recently on view on New York City's highline. It's a notation of the ASL sign for "Future," which, when combined with facial expressions, can include a quantity: hence "too much" future, a nod to how thinking too much about the future prevents one from being content in the present. When translated as a notation, she renders this "muchness" by thickening the line.





I don't sign. One high school in my hometown offered ASL courses as an option for "foreign" language requirements for hearing students, but this is still rare, and my school didn't. So, in the studio, we chatted by typing to one another through a website her friend developed for her that makes text easy to read when casually chatting: [www.orbiting.com](http://www.orbiting.com). And of course, we communicated through gestures, too. And lots of giggles. Drawings, websites, videos; by now, I hope you're getting a sense of how Kim's practice spans many media; also sound and performance and sculpture. "It's important to me that I keep on utilizing different platforms," she told me. "It's similar to working with different voices and interpreters," meaning that different mediums translate her ideas through different personalities.

I would dare to bet that the field of sound art is dominated by cis, abled, white men more than any other medium. "Sometimes I feel like I'm always the only woman/Asian/Deaf one in many sound events," Kim told me. She has an MFA in Sound and Music from Bard College, and often makes work involving some quite technical properties of sound, some of which I've come to understand for the first time through her work. Take *Prefixed Acoustomatics* (2017), which introduced to me the concept of "acoustomatic," or sound with no visible source. It's kind of like film theory's concept of extradiagetic sound. Kim made a set of ceramic sculptures that played with the idea that sound itself is an object. Sometimes, and especially in the field of sound, technical mastery can have the effect of isolating the uninitiated. But Kim neither assumes her audience to have pre-existing knowledge, nor panders to them with simple didacticism. Instead, she makes work the keeps in mind those who might have been made to feel like an "outsider" to the field of sound art.



We chatted about how the art world could be more accommodating of Deaf people: much video art, for instance, does not include closed captions when displayed in galleries. Then, there's money: it's hard enough for artists to be paid fairly, much less their interpreters, too. Kim says that this is getting better for her; that she used to be asked to split her speaker's fee with her interpreter's, a gesture that devalued her work, literally, simply because she required accommodations. "At first negotiating was exhausting," she recalled, "but I'm starting to enjoy it: asking for the right fee, asking for interpreters, asking for some support in terms of childcare."

In addition to the pie charts, Kim is currently working on a performance about all the voices that have spoken on her behalf. Catch her show with Thomas Mader, 'To Point a Naked Finger', at Albright Knox until April 19th.

# Los Angeles Times

## Review: What does sound look like? Artist Christine Sun Kim's funny, at times enthralling answers

By LEAH OLLMAN JAN 18, 2019 | 1:15 PM



Thomas Mader is Christine Sun Kim's arms in "Classified Digits." (Ghebaly Gallery)

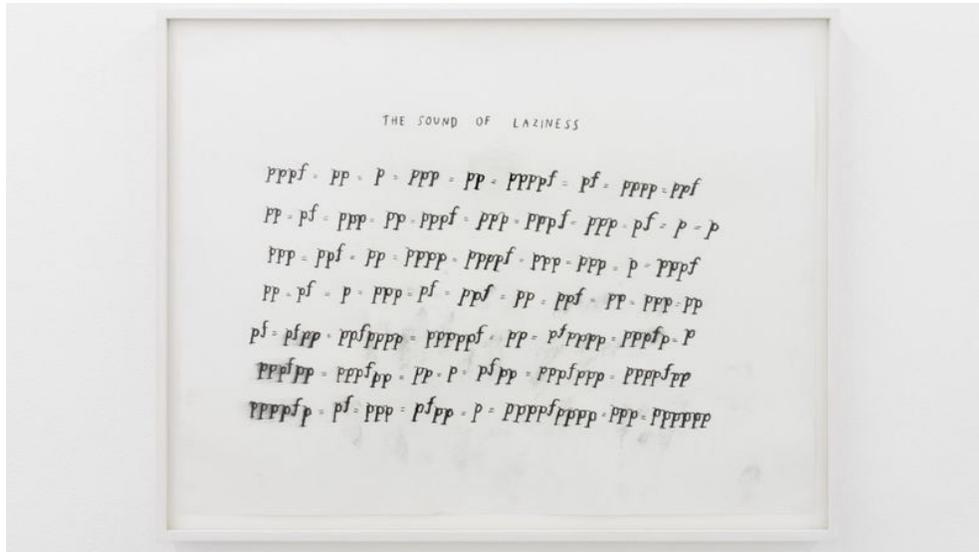
In her delectable video “Classified Digits,” Christine Sun Kim articulates, in American Sign Language, a dozen or so awkward scenarios: running into your ex, Skyping with spotty WiFi, looking askance at another’s shopping cart in the checkout line, attempting unsuccessfully to join a group discussion.

Each situation involves a sort of connection, either desperately sought-after or vigorously unwanted. The 5½-minute video plays like a straightforward instructional tape, with intertitles announcing the circumstances and Kim facing the camera before a neutral background, but slippage is built into the staging.

Her arms are pulled behind her back; those of her collaborator, Thomas Mader, who stands close behind her, wrap around her and speak on her behalf. Together, his hands and her facial expressions enact each mini scene. His tattooed bicep emerging from her petite trunk makes physical comedy out of the inherently imperfect art of communication.

The video is part of Kim’s subtly enthralling Ghebaly Gallery show, which also includes a wall mural, four-channel video installation and two compelling groups of charcoal drawings. One of the series, “The Sound Of,” is part musical notation, part concrete poetry. Each sheet is a visual and verbal evocation of a state of being. Kim uses a lexicon of just two symbols — F for forte, or loud, and P for piano, or soft. The score markings serve as raw material, preloaded with familiar

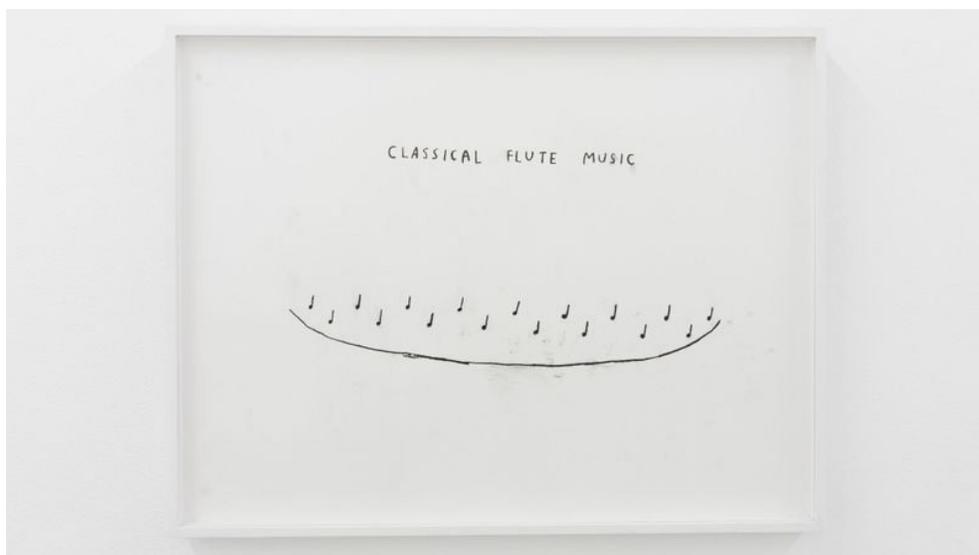
dynamic function but also repurposed through Kim's canny use of repetition and rhythm.



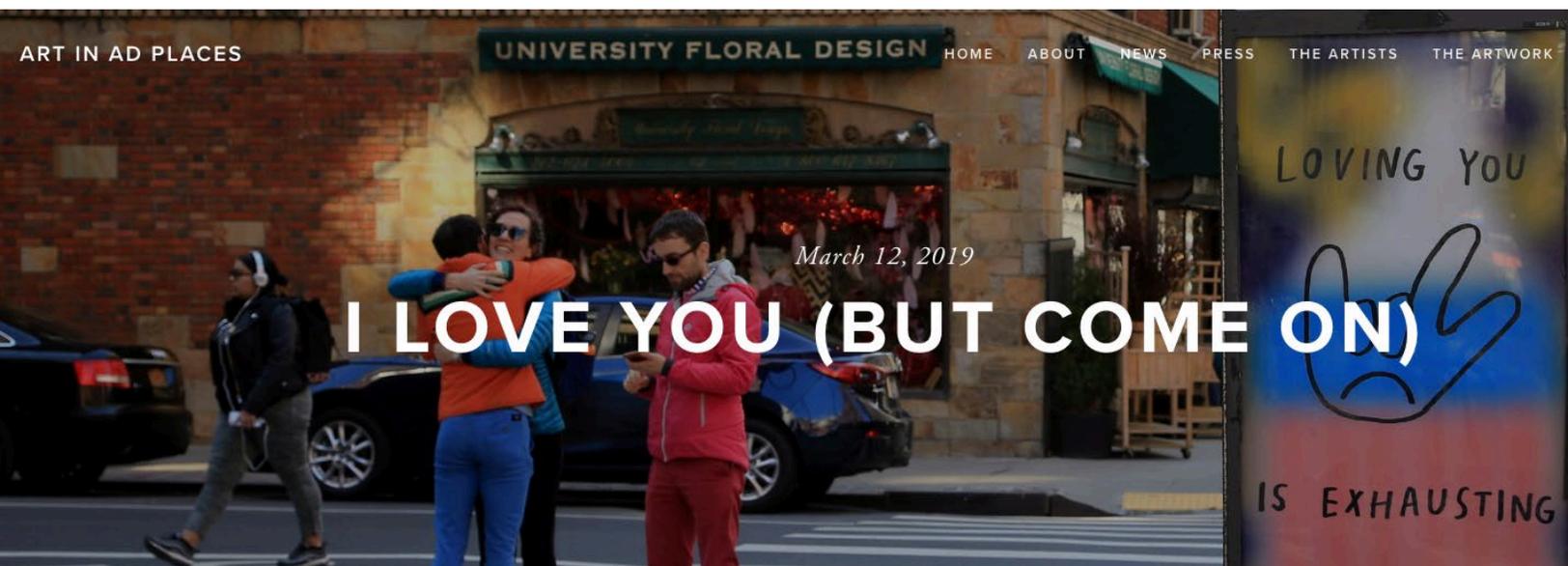
Christine Sun Kim's "The Sound of Laziness," 2016. Charcoal on paper 19.5 inches by 25.5 inches (Ghebaly Gallery)

"The Sound of Anticipation," with its row upon row of single and double Fs, invokes stuttering urgency. A similar pattern of Ps conjures stillness and sameness, "The Sound of Inactivity." Both symbols congregate in clunky, irregular masses that slow each other down or cancel each other out in "The Sound of Laziness."

In "Just Music," Kim, based in Berlin, visually extrapolates from the descriptive captions appearing in film and television scenes without dialogue. She foregoes use of a musical staff and relies instead only on an all-purpose musical note, legato marks and the space of the page to suggest "Suspenseful Background Music," "Very Fast Rap Song" and more. The notes of "Classical Flute Music" frolic neatly from left to right, chipper and controlled. Those constituting "Epic Ominous Music" thud and sink, as if doomed. In both sets of drawings, stray smudges and smears of charcoal read as ambient sounds, the found music — à la John Cage — of the every day.



Christine Sun Kim's "Classical Flute Music," 2016. Charcoal on paper, 19.75 inches by 25.5 inches (Ghebaly Gallery)



Christine Sun Kim for *Art in Ad Places*. Photo by Luna Park.

Here's something that everyone can empathize with. Christine Sun Kim's contribution to *Art in Ad Places* touches on love, patriotism, appropriation, and the unique complications that come with being an American living in a foreign country.

Christine says, "In American Sign Language (ASL) you combine the three letters: I, L, and Y into one sign to say 'I love you.' That sign is very visible in media and often signed by non-deaf celebrities. I thought to myself, 'maybe that sign needs a break from loving...' so I added a frown to it, as if it's its own person. And as an American living in Berlin, I added the presidential seal in the background because it's been incredibly frustrating and exhausting for me to watch the United States in the midst of the current political climate. I'm contributing to *Art in Ad Places* to let people know that they're not alone in this."

With this piece, because we love it so much (perhaps too much, if we take Christine's advice), we installed a few copies of the same artwork. In this post, you'll see two. Out on the street, see if you can find more.



Christine Sun Kim for *Art in Ad Places*. Photo by Luna Park.

"I Love You (But Come On)," *Art in Ad Places*, March 12, 2019.  
<https://www.artinadplaces.com/news/2019/3/11/khx47ozxkf2x4tokihhz352foovuxn>

Kim conceives afresh of sound's physicality and its visual properties, of verbal and musical expression as embodied in motion and gesture. Through wry humor born equally of futility and possibility, she helps broaden understanding of the myriad forms through which voice is channeled.

*Ghebaly Gallery, 2245 E. Washington Blvd., L.A. Through Saturday.  
(323) 282-5187, [www.ghebaly.com](http://www.ghebaly.com)*

# ARTFORUM



Christine Sun Kim, *The Sound of Anticipation*, 2016, charcoal on paper, 19 1/2 x 25 1/2".

LOS ANGELES

## Christine Sun Kim

GHEBALY GALLERY

2245 E Washington Blvd.

December 15–January 19

A thirty-six-foot-long mural greets the viewer at the entrance to Christine Sun Kim's exhibition. *Finish Forever*, 2018, depicts five stacked symmetrical shapes, each resembling a double-sided ladle, face down. These forms are part of the notations that Kim, who is Deaf, has invented for the sweeping arm gestures used in American Sign

Language (ASL). The ladle shape signifies the word *finish*. Its repetition here could mean, "It was finished a long time ago," or "Please stop already!" or the titular neologism, "Finish forever."

In the eighteen drawings on view, Kim expands on her visualizations of words and sounds, incorporating quantitative symbols and musical shorthand (such as "p" for *piano* [soft] and "f" for *forte* [loud]) to translate various experiences—for example, movie scores. The works' titles are often associated with particular emotions, as in *The Sound of Anticipation*, 2016, and *Suspenseful Background Music*, 2016. This may be because ASL relies on facial expressions in a way that spoken English does not. The spacing of Kim's mark-making evokes measurements from a seismograph, where lines that abruptly turn upward connote urgency while elongated lines connote grace. Viewed cumulatively, Kim's notations gesture toward the gulfs of alienation and consent that can be sensed between languages. Yet that gesture is at once challenging, playful, and accessible—this alphabet is best understood by feeling your way around it, seeking embodiment.

— Geoffrey Mak

SHARE

Mak, Geoffrey. "Critics' Picks: Christine Sun Kim"

*Artforum*, January 5, 2019.

<https://www.artforum.com/picks/christine-sun-kim-78254>



Illustration by Lok Wong.

## NAVIGATING LAWS AND ACCESSIBILITY IN EXHIBITION PRACTICES

REPORTS: [THE POINT](#) BY CHRISTINE SUN KIM FROM [MAR/APR 2018](#)

I am always mindful of how I identify and present myself in the art world—at the same time, I’m aware of how much certain laws, rules and expectations have shaped me. Given the fact that there are a variety of hierarchies in identities and languages, I usually navigate my multiple identities according to which platform I am presenting myself on, and how I’d like to communicate my art and personhood.

I recall a situation from a few years ago, when I worked as an educator at an art museum. They had asked me to conduct a video interview with an established older artist who happens to be deaf like me. He quickly (and understandably) declined the request because he found being interviewed by an American Sign Language (ASL) user to be a potential “distraction from his practice.” That incident led me to think about how privileges and disabilities correlate with each other. He is a white, male artist with speech skills, so perhaps his privilege allows him to build his own persona for his audiences. As a Korean-American female artist that primarily communicates in ASL, I’m much less privileged to tell people to fuck off.

Weirdly, there have been times where people have told me they’re not ableist or audist and that they see me just like anyone else. This has, more often than not, led to those same people ignoring my deafness when it would have been necessary for them to be mindful of it.

However, things are slowly changing. Disability studies emerged in the 1980s and have continued to thrive in a few countries. I consider myself culturally Deaf (since we are a linguistic minority, this identity has shaped up to something somewhat similar to an ethnic identity) rather than deaf (in a medical sense, as far as hearing loss is concerned). As an adult, I have come to understand that a large part of my identity and career is a product of the Americans with Disabilities Act that was enacted in 1990. (Quick fact: it was modeled after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin.)

Under this legislation, I was able to study and obtain college degrees with the aid of certified sign language interpreters (funded by institutional accessibility budgets), could watch as many television series and movies with captions as I liked, and was able to make phone calls with help from online interpreters. I have exhibited, performed and lectured worldwide.

I have noticed that the more laws there are that protect people with disabilities, the greater flexibility or freedom I enjoy in terms of my own identity. In places with zero or few laws supporting people with disability, I spend most of my time hustling, asking the same questions over and over again and explaining why some of the accommodations that have to be made prior to and during my engagement are necessary not just for myself, but for everyone involved. Naturally, the energy spent on these negotiations compromises the effort that could have instead been spent on my artwork.

Two factors have contributed to my ability to fully express myself: the internet, which enables me to communicate with people who offer exhibition opportunities via email; and sign language interpreters, who work with me in school, conference and museum settings. Not every institution is generous and willing to find ways to compensate things beyond minimum needs, but there are a few good apples.

A number of museums in the United States have a budget for accessibility, but the amount of red tape involved makes it very difficult to access these funds. In the past, curators and directors often had to resort to using their exhibition budget to cover my specific accommodation requirements. In these situations, there often is discomfort and tension, which really could have been easily prevented.

In 2015, I held a performance-talk titled “Five Finger Discount History” at the Berlin Biennale, where I offered a critique of Deaf history and retold it with my personal observations added. Sure, my identities overlap—I’m a woman, Asian, American, a mother—but my Deaf identity often comes first and foremost, because of the way I communicate, which constantly shapes my place in a society full of spoken languages. I find it intriguing that my identity is often represented by my interpreters’ voices, which acts as an extension to my identity.

Diversity isn’t my favorite word, but I hope that one day, societies and systems will become flexible enough to suit everyone and anyone. There needs to be a better trust system between artists and organizers, who should be fiercely protective of each cultural practitioner’s time and work. I believe that everyone is responsible for creating or respecting spaces for minorities.

It took me years to feel comfortable enough (and perhaps, with the privileges I have developed as an artist ever since) to be open about my Deaf experience. Because of the increasing abundance of identity labels, people are more or less open about their intersectional identities today. This has impacted my practice and dialogue, and as a result, I no longer include “deaf since birth” in my biography.

Art & Photography

## Christine Sun Kim Is the Artist Challenging 'Hearing Etiquette'

*3 January, 2017*



Christine Sun Kim by Clara Bahlsen

“I can see sound now through people, interpreters. It’s not as see-through anymore.” - Christine Sun Kim

Although Christine Sun Kim moved to Berlin a couple of years ago, she’s rarely ever in the city. Constantly travelling between exhibitions, lectures and conferences, the Californian multidisciplinary artist’s life is a whirlwind of planes, trains and automobiles, as her Instagram attests. In September she was in Seoul picking up a Se-MA-HANA Media Art Award, and today she’s speaking from London as she prepares to perform “Nap Disturbance” at Frieze before hosting a workshop titled “Face Value” at the Tate Modern. Yet despite the constant jetlag, her enthusiasm for her work is undiminished. “I’m obsessed with other people’s voices giving me a voice,” she says via an American

Sign Language (ASL) mediator. “I need to have a sonic identity to navigate the world, an interpreter who can take in the sound of the environment with their ears and mediate it.” Although Kim was born deaf, this hasn’t prevented her experimenting with noise in works such as “A Choir of Glances” (2014), in which hearing people experienced what it’s like to be deaf through sound-proof headphones, and “Subjective Loudness” (2013), where a list of noises were turned into a musical score. “[Sound] has become more tangible to me,” she says, reflecting on her early experiences of working with the medium. “I can see sound now through people, interpreters. It’s not as see-through anymore.”



Nap Disturbance, 2016, Frieze, London, 2016, courtesy the artist and Carroll/Fletcher Gallery

“I’m fasting in language instead of food, and my perspective shifts a lot,” - Christine Sun Kim

Through this stance Kim is challenging ableist attitudes toward audio impairment, or “hearing etiquette” as the artist calls it. “Nap Disturbance”, for instance, negotiates the behavioural standards that go with sound. The first performance Kim has ever choreographed, it features a group of deaf and hearing actors who explore the sonic range produced by the movement of household objects such as chairs, stationery and food packaging. Along the way, Kim directed the group to make noises “from [the] polite to [the] not-so-polite”, in order to highlight the reactions that deaf people encounter. “Everywhere I go, I might not know the sonic limitations,” Kim explains, “but when I start working with sound then I get the [measure] of what I can and can’t do. A space has sonic limitations when people are around and I’m there.” Working in the international art world has turned Christine Sun Kim into an activist, a transformation that she publically acknowledged at this year’s Berlin Biennale, where she gave a deaf power salute, placing one hand on her ear and the other in the air as a fist. At first she was afraid doing so might distract from her practice, but having begun this path she’s no longer concerned, driven by the desire to help other deaf people receive the support she did. While studying at Bard College, the American Disability Act ensured that she received the assistance of ASL interpreters, and the experience of living in Europe has reminded her of what it’s like to be unable to communicate. “I’m fasting in language instead of food, and my perspective shifts a lot,” she says.



Nap Disturbance, 2016, Frieze, London, 2016, courtesy the artist and Carroll/Fletcher Gallery

“My work [exists] on so many levels, I’m analysing my place in different aspects of life, as a woman and as a person who uses sign language” - Sun Kim

ASL linguistics are part of Kim’s artistic practice, too. At the Tate Modern in October, her workshop was accompanied by “Tables and Windows”, a film made with her partner, Thomas Mader. In it they develop a new set of visual tools for mapping space by combining facial expressions and hand gestures. Kim’s drawings are also inspired by American sign language (“It’s important to keep up the physical activity of your hands,” she acknowledges”), and often seem similar to musical scores, creating continuity with her performances and sound work. Kim’s practice therefore operates at the interstices of sound, vision and movement. Although commonly referred to as a sound artist, she doesn’t identify as one, or indeed as any other per se, saying that she prefers to experiment with different media since she gets bored easily. Right now she’s preparing to make films with the choreographer Karole Armitage, who she met when they were both director’s fellows at MIT Media Lab. She’s even flirting with the idea of turning her hand at pottery. “My work [exists] on so many levels,” she says. “I’m analysing my place in different aspects of life, as a woman and as a person who uses sign language. I work with what my current interests are and I move forward from that.”

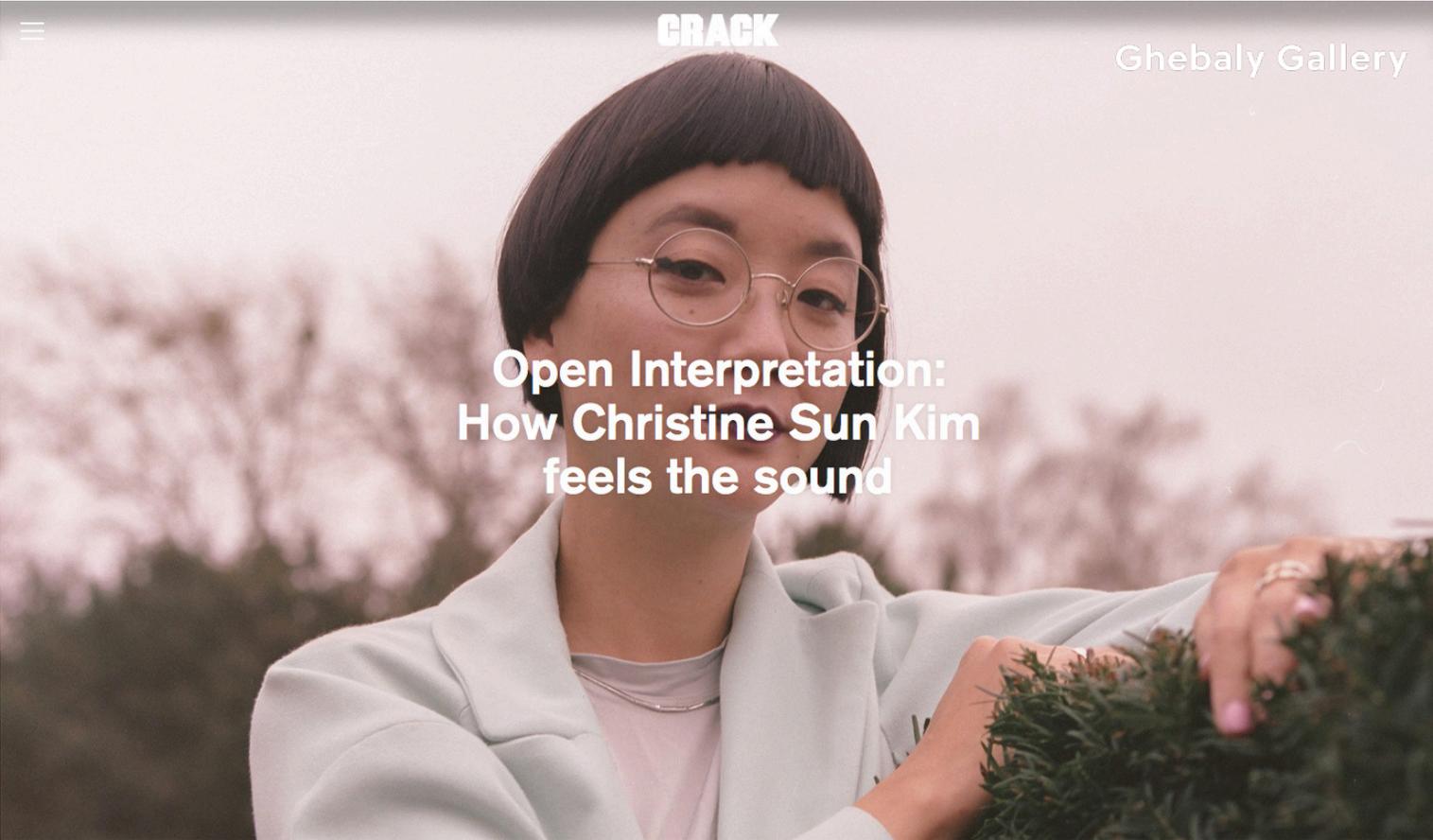


Nap Disturbance, 2016, Frieze, London, 2016, courtesy the artist and Carroll/Fletcher Gallery

**Taken from SLEEK 52 Upcoming exhibitions:** The 11th Shanghai Biennale runs until 12 March 2017 “Looking at one thing and thinking of something else. A Group Show in Four Parts” at Carroll/Fletcher, London, until 25 February 2017

*By An Paenhuysen*

Paenhuysen, An. “Christine Sun Kim Is the Artist Challenging ‘Hearing Etiquette’.”  
*SLEEK*, January 3, 2017.  
<https://www.sleek-mag.com/article/christine-sun-kim/>



## Open Interpretation: How Christine Sun Kim feels the sound

Words by: Josie Thaddeus-Johns

Christine Sun Kim first noticed the church bells ringing when she was on a Skype call to a friend. Seemingly at odd times and without schedule, the bells were an aggravating incursion into Kim's daily life: "I don't know anything about those sounds, and now they're a part of daily routine," she says, with light indignation.

Kim may be particularly sensitive to audio pollution because she works with sound in her art practice. Her projects, which have been shown at institutions such as MOMA and the Tate Modern, have ranged from interactive audio installations using Velcro, to films recaptioned by deaf people, to scratchy and neat pencil diagrams labelled as sounds. This month she will begin to explore the medium of sound with a series of artistic interventions called *Busy Days*, which will take place around Amsterdam and beyond.

Although Kim is deaf, the clanging melodies of those church bells still jangled their way into her Berlin studio. "I actually found the sound to be quite invasive," she explains. "I want to know when the bells are ringing, I want to know how long they're ringing, why they're ringing. If they're in my sight, the bells enter into my mind." The sound still forced itself into her consciousness, despite not hearing it with her ears. It became a kind of obsession for the American artist. "Now I've come to the



point where I know everything about the church and the bells and I feel better. It's like getting my self-control back," she says.

I've met with Kim in her homely and spacious studio, where she also lives. Seven months pregnant, she is animated and forthright, hands whirring as we discuss her work through her interpreter, Beth Staehle, on Skype. The space she lives and works in is quietly artistic, with only subtle clues to her occupation. In the corner of a room, I notice the scrupulous, neat Fs of a record sleeve she created for her 'instructional listening' project with musician Wolfgang Müller, *Panning Fanning* in 2013. Kim's bold capitals and curly italicisations illustrate a container for two records which explore the similarities in American Sign Language (and English) between the two title words.



“As a deaf person I believe that there are different ways of listening but my number one way of doing it isn’t through my ears,” she explains of her collaborations with musicians such as the *Fingertrap Quartet*, which included contributions from Dev Hynes and, later, Jamie Stewart of Xiu Xiu. Listening to Kim, I’m reminded that there are many ways to experience sound that resonate far beyond the aural impact it has in our ears. “I’m interested in how people look at me as a deaf sound artist,” she says. “A lot of people ask if I work with visual sound and the answer is: not really. That comes from the hearing perspective... I like to think about sound as social currency, sound as norms, or collective reactions, concepts, ideas.”

Since she often works with interpreters, collaboration is an important part of Kim’s work, as well as her life. “I think that interpretation is the highest form of collaboration: it’s essentially an experience when two voices become one,” she says. “It requires a lot of trust, feedback and discussion. I can say: ‘Today I want to sound smart, or funny’, and it’s up to them to achieve those things. I have a voice – it’s a big one – but it just happens that my voice doesn’t have any sound. Realistically, interpreters are a huge part of my life, so it seems obvious they would end up a part of my work as a result.”



One such instance is in the drawings that are currently on show at the vast Kindl art space, a disused beer brewery in the south of Berlin, in ‘Up and Down’, curated by An Pauhuysen. The six square soundscapes are enigmatically titled: for example, *The Sound Of Being Resigned*, *The Sound of Anticipation* and so on. Crossings out and rubbings on the paper are the lightly visible echoes behind the firm, careful little Fs and Ps that make up the drawings (like a musician’s *forte* and *piano*, meaning ‘loud’ and ‘quiet’ respectively).

These portraits describe some of the resonances Kim was hearing after last year’s unnerving political events. Like many of us who read polls, in the days and months following the catastrophic US election result, Kim felt tricked. In Germany, away from her home country, she found herself listening out for the feelings of the aftermath. For example, she began to zone out more frequently, inspiring *The Sound of Being Spaced Out*, which she describes as “physically just feeling at a loss, separated from [what] I know to be normal.” The paper version of this sound is a series of Ps, their multiplicity an overwhelming, buzzing quietness. “This series discusses the use of musical dynamics. I think of the notes that are shown there to be similar to the way the interpreters create my voice,” she explains.



There is a music shop on Christine Sun Kim’s street in Wedding, one of Berlin’s northern neighbourhoods. Its first-floor windows are decorated with simple, colourful stickers of musical symbols. I notice a jaunty single quaver, the dark freckle and tail that represent one eighth of a beat to a musician on a score. The idea is simple: when we read these notes we can all understand and recreate the same sounds. At first glance, Christine Sun Kim’s systems of representation appear just as legible. And yet, on closer inspection, her perspective reaches further into the murky ways that we experience sound, complicating our ideas of what music and communication are in the first place.

Photography: James Perolls  
Hair and Makeup: Victoria Reuter

*Busy Days* with Christine Sun Kim runs at De Appel Arts Centre, Amsterdam, 6 May –  
20 August

Thaddeus-Johns, Josie. “Open Interpretation: How Christine Sun Kim feels the sound”  
*CRACK*, October 6, 2016.  
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THE DIS BLOG

## Sonic identity politics with Christine Sun Kim



January 20th, 2016 by Jeppe Ugelvig

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*The social conditioning of deaf people constitutes Christine Sun Kim's inquiry into the anthropogenic definitions of sound. As a sound artist born without the ability to hear, Kim investigates the sonic as a form of capital, and the currencies it formats in social, cultural, and political life. A former artist-in-residency at the Whitney Museum, she has compared American Sign Language and music in TED talks and was featured in MoMA's Greater New York, cutting through the stubbornly insular art world categorized as 'sound art' with interactive installations that explore the intersection between technology and the sensorial. Kim explores visible and invisible etiquettes of sound – textual, social, visual – as viewers attempt to navigate her often physically-challenging installations.*

*A new series of work, on display at Carroll / Fletcher Gallery in London, deals with mediated sound experiences, as she highlights the curious phenomenon of amplified sound captured by film subtitles. In her treatment of the films 2001: A Space Odyssey and The Little Mermaid (who gave up her voice to live with humans), the descriptions of sound are brought to an extreme by four of Kim's deaf friends, overloading the spectator with simultaneous visual-auditory impressions. What would usually seem disturbing or excessive becomes a space for sonic subjectivity that reshuffles the hierarchies of sound and the moving image (what's more important – the protagonist's monologue or the rustling of the trees in the background?) – a crucial point for the gatekeepers of mediated sound.*

**Jeppe Ugelvig: In your work, do you approach sound with a consistent definition in mind, for example a scientific (vibration) or musical (symbolic notation, music sheets) definition?**

**Christine Sun Kim:** When I started to consider sound as art, vibration was the first thing that came to mind. After a while, I realised it wasn't enough and I needed to go beyond its materiality. I began shifting towards other aspects: idea, musicality, social currency, notation, phenomena. I remember the moment in graduate school when I saw a classmate's hand drawn empty staves, he was notating a song with staff lines rather than notes, so you could see the weight of each note by looking at each line's bumps (they're not very straight lines). That was one of the first realizations I had – how I almost always mirror sound by watching people or interpreters like they're staff lines, rather than obtaining sound directly like notes. My definition is always evolving, not consistent, and it should be like this.



Christine Sun Kim, Rustle Tustle, installation view, Carroll / Fletcher. Courtesy of the artist and Carroll / Fletcher



Christine Sun Kim, Rustle Tustle, installation view, Carroll / Fletcher. Courtesy of the artist and Carroll / Fletcher

**JU:** The rhetorical question “If a tree falls in the woods and nobody is there to hear it, does the event create a sequence of waves of pressure that propagate through the air?” suggests an anthropogenic definition of sound (and thus, a definition that is mostly non-queer and socially normative). Do you tackle this in your work?

**CSK:** It’s weirdly fun for me to discuss sound’s existence; I don’t think it needs a person to recognise its existence. If a sign language interpreter isn’t present to voice my non-sound signing (voice), does that mean my voice doesn’t exist? This might sound super simple, but some people have told me how much they would like to hear my voice (I call that “sonic identity”) when we chat quietly through handwriting on paper or typing on phone not being need to use that dating app . With that said, sound should be able to independently exist on its own... and people are just too hardwired to behave in a certain way around sound.

**JU:** What was your initial encounter with ‘sound art’ and ‘sound artists’ and the particular paradigms which that part of the art world seems to work within? It seems very rigid to me!

**CSK:** Ha, tell me about it. I was scared shitless when I decided to work with sound,

completely unsure where to start and that made me very insecure when talking with artists about it. For the longest time, I had always perceived it as a hearing thing and that kind of mentality was difficult to change. Deaf people are socially conditioned to put sound in their ownership from the beginning. I was really lucky because in my early career, a string of small grants and residencies started to happen at once, and everyone was super supportive of my practice. That's when I was able to make so much progress.

However, there seem to be several different responses to my work: people romanticising the idea of me discovering “new sounds” (it's obviously far fetched; it's like being expected to find new colours), and others being sceptical or total assholes. It doesn't help that sound art is relatively new and hard to categorise ... everything's just murky and interdisciplinary that it can be ridiculous to call it ‘sound art,’ because so many artists now use sound in their work, even painters and writers. In a way, everyone is a sound artist.

**JU:** You've previously described sound as an economy, like money or power – of which deaf people would be considered ‘poor’. How might we understand the definition of sound as a socially-constructed?

**CSK:** Not everyone gets to work with such a large number of interpreters as I do. It feels like the more interpreters I work with, the more social currency I have. People seem to “see” me by listening to interpreters' voices. I feel very much present among non-signers if my interpreter is doing the job right. If I don't exercise my place in society by working with other voices, I think my currency as a person/artist gets weakened. On a different note, interpreters aren't cheap and I am always grateful whenever organisers and institutions are “rich” enough to hire them. That's a different kind of currency; my interpreters need to be paid with money currency in order to act as my sonic voice so that my social currency increases. The bottom line is that non-sound languages need to be in the same place as sound languages.



Christine Sun Kim, How to Measure Loudness, 2014, Dry pastel and pencil on paper



Christine Sun Kim, How to Measure Quietness, 2014, Dry pastel and pencil on paper

**JU:** What do you mean with the notion ‘sound etiquette’?

**CSK:** When you try to be quiet out of respect for others, that’s sound etiquette. I’m pretty mindful and maybe a bit too conscious on my part: walk quietly when somebody’s asleep, eat quietly in front of others, no sound during classes, etc. Sometimes I bend these “rules” when I’m with a group of deaf friends by being a little loud, moving around a lot, etc. If I was the only signer in the group of non-signers, I move much less and have super intimate conversations with people through typing on the phone one to one.

**JU:** I was really taken with your video installation that uses *A Space Odyssey* and *The Little Mermaid*. Why did you choose those two films? Can you tell me about what led you to making this piece?

**CSK:** Thank you! It’s my first video project and this is definitely a new direction in my work. This came from the experience of watching *Kumieko*, the Treasure Hunter and I found myself reading instead of watching. Their captioner went overboard (it’s a good thing!) and tried to capture every sound: the sound of a man scribbling on paper, the sound of rain hitting window, of the city waking up, and so on. They were beautifully abstract and imposing. My understanding of sound largely depends on each movie’s captioner and their selection of sounds, just like my relationship with sign language interpreters. For example, they would interpret a teacher’s lecture and not mention some kids gossiping at a corner: it’s like second hand selected listening.

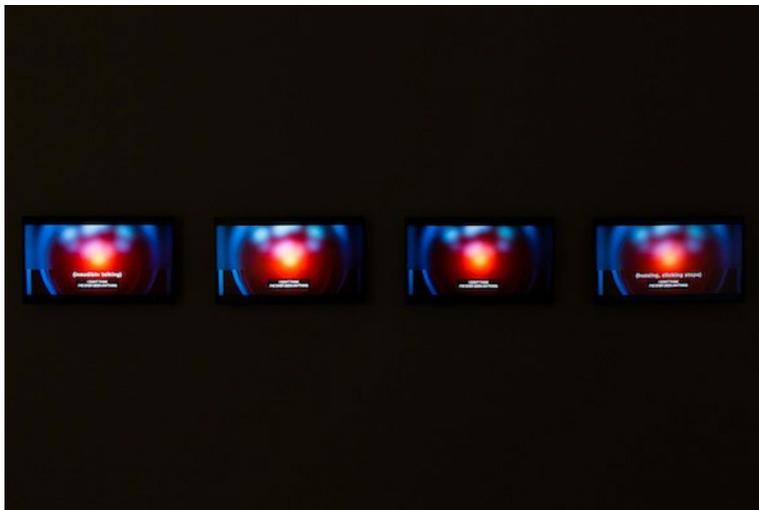
So for *Close Readings*, there are five movie scenes in total and they all resonate with the theme of voice. *2001* is partially about a machine taking over the spaceship and making decisions without astronauts. *The Little Mermaid* is one of my all time favourite childhood movies (although I feel pretty conflicted about it now, for feminist reasons) and Ariel the mermaid basically gave up her voice in order to get a pair of walking legs, so she could assimilate with walking humans (which is eerily similar to some of deaf experiences). I put all five scenes together and invited four deaf friends to add their sound captions.



Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings*, 2015, 4-channel video Courtesy of the artist and Carroll / Fletcher



Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings*, Film still, 2015.



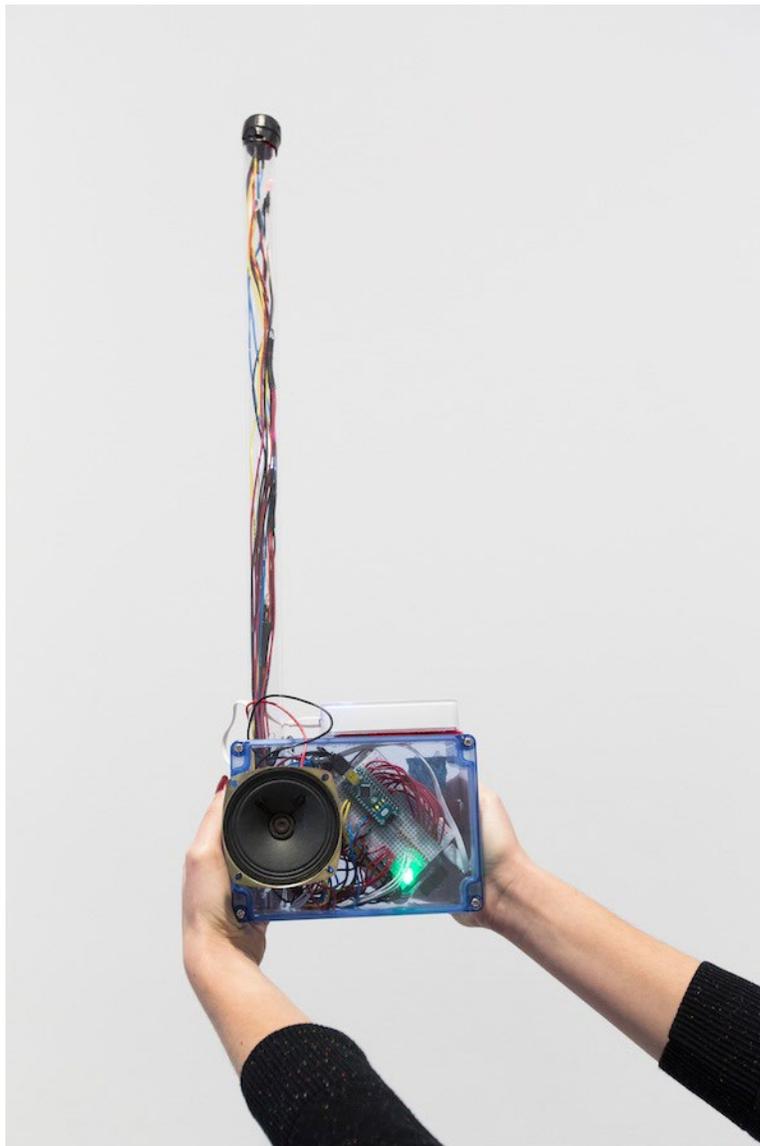
Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings*, Film still, 2015.

**JU: For me, the immediate reaction to this piece was a feeling of violence – of bringing-forth or amplifying sounds that would normally be ignored. It reveals a kind of everyday audial editing of sensual stimuli (in this case, film and the normative vernacular of subtitles), particular when mediated through media. It was incredibly powerful.**

**CSK:** Yes, sound is so incredibly multi-dimensional that it's mind-blowing for me to imagine a captioner trying to encapsulate it into very few words. There is always "ominous music" going on and sometimes movies just describe it as "music," at which point I would miss the warning that something nasty is about to happen. I also would like to see more subtle cues such as describing a character's voice: female, low-pitched, heavy accented, normal volume, a lot of pauses, etc.

**JU: Why did you choose to blur parts of the screen?**

**CSK:** It's not really about movie scenes themselves, so I wanted to partially blur the screen and encourage the viewers to read instead of watching.



Christine Sun Kim, *Close Readings*, Film still, 2015.

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# Art in America

INTERVIEWS Oct 6, 2016

## The Politics of Sound: An Interview with Christine Sun Kim

by [Philomena Epps](#)

Christine Sun Kim and  
Taeyoon Choi: *99  
Objects on Incomplete  
Text #6 "E"* by Charles  
Gaines, 2015, at  
Whitney Museum of  
American Art. Photo  
Filip Wolak. Courtesy  
Carroll / Fletcher.



This week, as part of Frieze Live 2016, the events program for the London art fair, California—born, Berlin—based artist Christine Sun Kim is presenting a new performance piece, *Nap Disturbance*. Born deaf, Kim explores the materiality of sound through drawing, painting, and video, opening up new fields of perception to hearing and hearing impaired audiences alike. Much of her practice has been developed around what she refers to as “hearing etiquette”—certain behaviors she finds herself adopting to remain within the bounds of accepted social interactions in an auditory world. While she cannot hear them herself, the artist has developed a heightened awareness of the sounds her actions produce. She thinks of the gestures and reactions of the people around her as an “echo chamber.” I corresponded with Kim over e-mail in the run-up to the fair.

**PHILOMENA EPPS** I want to start by talking about “hearing etiquette.” In your 2015 TED talk, you refer to certain behaviors that you’ve learned: “don’t slam the door,” “don’t make too much noise when eating from the potato chip bag,” “don’t burp,” and so on. Can you talk about how your Frieze performance grew out of the experience of trying to keep quiet while your partner—who works night shifts—sleeps during the day? How does this relate to the performance itself?

**CHRISTINE SUN KIM** When someone takes a nap near me, I feel as if the volume goes up—my quiet noises become really loud. I’ve been thinking a lot about how sound occupies the space around me; sometimes I feel careless or suffocated or self-conscious when I’m with people. I don’t get feedback from my own noises, only from others, which is why I often call people “speakers,” as in the equipment. I’ve adapted this concept of the varied experience of sound in different contexts and at different calibration points loosely from a book I read when I was young, *Too Much Noise* by Ann McGovern. It’s about a farmer who complains about subtle noises in his house, like the creaking roof. Upon the advice from the village wise man, he adds more and more animals to his household before getting rid all of them in the end. He then finds the house incredibly quiet, and he sleeps like a baby. You have to experience something in the extreme to find a small amount of it insignificant.

For my performance, I’ve choreographed moves with performers utilising household items that create a range of sounds, from polite to not-so-polite, like sip or loudly gulp water from a glass, tiptoe or drag feet, and softly or loudly fold a chair. I find it interesting how much I have to respect or be conscious of other people’s sonic space, not the other way around.

**EPPS** How does *Nap Disturbance* expand on the development of your practice so far, especially in relation to recent projects like *Close Readings* [2015] or *Game of Skill 2.0* [2015]?

**KIM** It’s hard to tell at this moment but my practice offers different possibilities of listening: listening while napping, listening while watching movies, listening while playing games, listening while walking, and so on. Listening can mean so many things, and can encompass many other sensory experiences.

**EPPS** I am curious about how the shifts from polite to not-so-polite behaviors in the Frieze performance will also be amplified by the undercurrents of what is considered appropriate social etiquette at an art fair.

**KIM** Planning this at first was somewhat challenging for me as the fair asked me not to be too loud as it would disturb vendors and their dealings with buyers. Maybe that’s a comment on how much social value sound has. I hadn’t realized the extent of how loud art fairs can be until I started planning this piece. It seems like every time I plan a sound piece in a certain place, I always end up learning about the sound limits of that place. It’s not like I can walk into a McDonald’s and ask, “how loud can I be?” “Just enough not to disturb the others enjoying their Big Macs.”

**EPPS** I've read that your performers are going to be dressed in bright chroma green. Chroma-key is a technique commonly used in film and video to digitally insert backdrops and other images during post-production. Can you talk about the significance of the performance as an intervention in relation to the binary notions of visibility and audibility, disappearance and silence?

**KIM** I love how we're supposed to disappear into the backdrop of the fair, especially in our chroma-key costumes. But at the same time that color will definitely make us stand out, visually disturbing the surroundings. I designed them to look like gym clothes, but the kind you'd wear at home, not for exercise. The hoodie, to me, enables the maximum quietness—in terms of visibility—that we can achieve. Our best attempt to be the quietest or most inconspicuous is when we put the hood on and tighten it.

**EPPS** Do you anticipate any audience participation?

**KIM** I'll use the audience's glances and turned necks as my feedback. If we're doing something that's supposed to be loud and no one is looking at us, I will prompt the performers to be much louder.

**EPPS** What do you hope people will bring away from the performance?

**KIM** I hope they'll learn to relax their sound expectations for others, maybe . . . and to take naps with earplugs.

**EPPS** Your performance activates the Frieze tent as a kind of testing ground for larger philosophical ideas about social interaction, ableism, and privilege. I'm interested in how this potentially complements the workshop you have developed for Tate Modern's new Exchange program, which will take place on October 13.

**KIM** My process has always been highly collaborative and I think that influence comes from my long-term relationships with sign language interpreters. Art events can often be exclusive and their social value sometimes seems questionable. At Tate Exchange, I'm asking participants to work collaboratively to brainstorm and develop a short film. As far as issues of ableism and privilege are concerned, I am receiving better support for my communication differences and opportunities to produce work from these kinds of events and programs. The workshop is open to all and is fully accessible to deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing participants.

Epps, Philomena. "The Politics of Sound: An Interview with Christine Sun Kim"

*Art In America*, October 6, 2016.

<https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/the-politics-of-sound-an-interview-with-christine-sun-kim/>

## Deaf Artist Christine Sun Kim Is Reinventing Sound

Through sound art, performance, installations, drawings, and videos, Senior TED Fellow Christine Sun Kim is challenging "hearing culture" and our limited definition of sound, and electrifying the art world in the process.

STUFF | By Cassie Packard | Apr 3 2015, 11:33pm

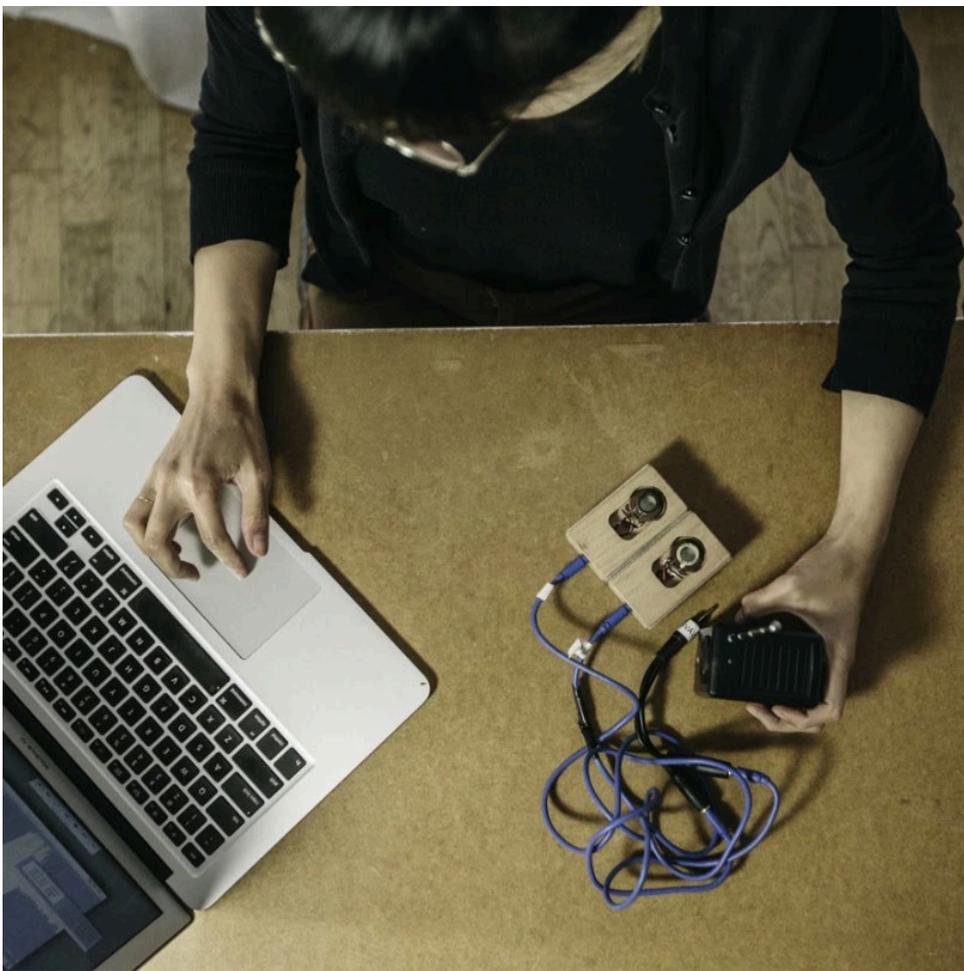


Photo by Sirio Magnabosco. Vibrotactile devices donated by Deborah C. Egloff / McGill University. All photos courtesy of the artist

For artist Christine Sun Kim, sound is a “ghost.” The multiple-MFA-holding Senior TED Fellow who has had a Whitney Museum residency and exhibited at MoMA, has been profoundly deaf since birth. The sonic hush in which she lives has pushed her towards exploring sound through her work in a varied oeuvre of performance, installation, drawing, and video.

Initially, Kim strove to translate sound into direct visual terms. She experimented with vibrations, placing coated paintbrushes and inked quills on wooden boards atop subwoofers and speakers pulsing with ambient noise. Her process resulted in lovely minimalist paintings, audibles turned objets d'art. But the project felt like translating a text using only half the alphabet. “Low frequency sounds—vibrations—only make up a very small fraction of the sound world,” she explains. When it came to capturing the rich tapestry of Kim’s lived experience with sound, this approach fell short.

Recognizing that facilitating paint-stained traces of vibrations was only one component of making the sonic visible, Kim tried a different tack. The artist produced her own semiotics of sound by piecing together a tangle of overlapping languages and systems, including musical notation, body language, and American Sign Language (ASL), which she describes as similar to sound in its intrinsic spatiality.

Her information system make the rigid definition of sound as anesthetized vibrations meeting a hearing ear feel nothing short of antiquated. It does this by capturing life in a world where sound is funneled more through social interactions than through ears. Because of this, experiencing her work is similar to the moment when one realizes listening to the same song in the dark is different than hearing it in the light.

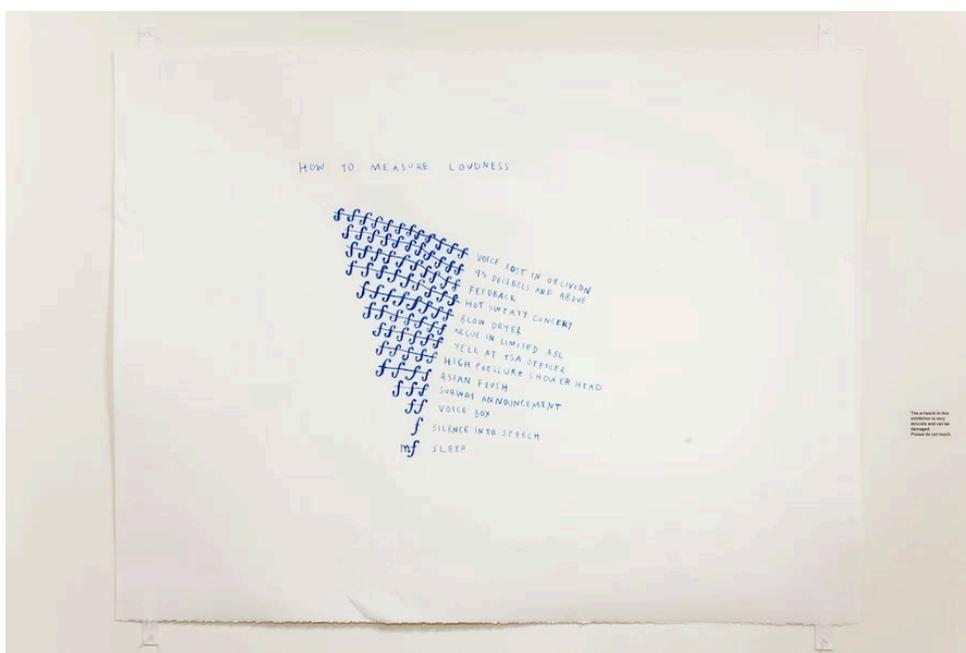


Photo by Artisphere

Kim spent much of her life mirroring others’ relationships to sound in an effort to follow a culturally dominant “sound etiquette.” Growing up animated in a less effusive Korean family (a facet, she points out, of both Korean and hearing cultures), Kim learned quietness—“to tone it down”—in response to eyes upon her. “At first I thought I experience sound mostly through vibrations, but I realized it’s much more than that,” she explains. “I’m mostly informed by the way people react and behave around it and then I in turn mirror them, sometimes out of good manners.” In her artistic practice, Kim strives to reclaim sound, to carve out a space where sound doesn’t revolve around some borrowed etiquette, but instead around her own distinct experience. Avant-garde composer John Cage declared sound to be the most public of senses, and

it hasn't been a private experience for Kim. To the contrary, she describes the deaf community as a "collective culture." Built through a shared experience of sound and language, the deaf community has its own sound etiquette: for example, the artist explains, if someone joins a table, it is customary that people move back their chairs to let the newcomer in without looking up, so those at the table can continue to watch whomever is signing. Regardless of her audience, a predilection for the communal is in Kim's nature, and her art is frequently collaborative and participatory. "I often collaborate with others in order to make my voice known or relevant," she says. "People are almost an extension of myself, namely sign language interpreters."

Collaboration was integral to Kim's recent sonic performance piece *Fingertap Quartet*. In putting together the piece, the artist provided a list of 12 specific sounds to her musician friend, Dev Hynes of Blood Orange (a later version featured voice samples by Jamie Stewart of Xiu Xiu). Kim remarks: "I trusted [Dev] enough to make voice samples based on my instructions and I did not ask anyone to double-check for me. Conceptually, I leased his voice." Using the voice samples, an audio recorder, a laptop, and transducers, Kim created four sound files. With projected text, she communicated the concept underlying each sound file to her audience: "Like/Good," a sound you like and think is good; the converse sound, "No Like/No Good"; "Like/No Good," a sound you like but suspect might not be good; and a sound you don't like but suspect might not be good, "No Like/Good."



Photo by Conrado Johns

Kim's participatory performances "have a lot to do with the social value of each person's voice," she explains. In *Subjective Loudness*, 200 Tokyo residents helped Kim convert a list of 85-decibel noises into a score, effectively "becoming her voice." For *4x4*, Kim invited four individuals whose voices she respects—an entrepreneur, an artist, a designer, and a musician—to sing her lyrics. Kim then distorted the voices by playing them at a frequency below human hearing range; for a night, a Stockholm gallery space was filled with her inaudible song as its low frequencies rattled the gallery's windows and doors. In *Face Opera*, one of Kim's favorite works (interestingly, her preference is for her performances), the artist and a group of her friends—all prelingually deaf—formed an unconventional choir. Upon Kim's cues, a "conductor" moved his or her eyebrows, mouth, cheeks, and eyes to convey a concept. To perform Kim's score—which was separated into acts like "I want to trust you" and "Grass"—the "singers" echoed and responded to the nuances of the conductor's facial markers. Kim estimates that 30

to 40 percent of ASL is manual production while the rest is expressed through the face and body movements. *Face Opera* alluded to the extent to which ASL relies upon facial expression and implied that attention to the nuances of facial expression can constitute hearing.

Kim's work is conceptually strong, but its real power comes from the way it honors and dignifies her own experience. In the perceptual regime that is hearing culture, Kim tells dominant sonic norms to go screw themselves. They represent a limiting etiquette, not her actual relationship with sound. As Kim pointed out in a past TED interview: "It was not like society gave me a clear, safe space to do whatever I wanted. I had to learn how to integrate their ways."

Kim's art doesn't acquiesce. It makes its own rules, taking sound on her own terms. And yet, even though she doesn't aim to be political and is more focused on expressing her personal trajectory, when reflecting on her art, one could point to that rallying cry of second-wave feminism: "The personal is political."

The mentality that imbues Kim's work came front and center at a recent TED2015 conference. At the conference, Kim tried on a prototype of a vest—both a vest in the traditional sense and a handy abbreviation for Versatile Extra-Sensory Transducer—



Photo by Sara Linderoth

that translates sound into vibration patterns. The vest is intended for the deaf as an alternative to the invasive cochlear implant. Kim thinks that the vest could be useful. With it, she could localize sound in space, which would help her plan and develop future sound installations. But in a recent interview with TED Fellow Renée Hlozek, Kim made an apt point, asking: "Why should I receive training on how to recognize speech through vibration patterns? I'm falling into the same behavioral trap again. The vest is mediating communication, but the problem is it's only mediating it one way, making the hearing people understood by me." Kim's art represents one small chip in that normative block.

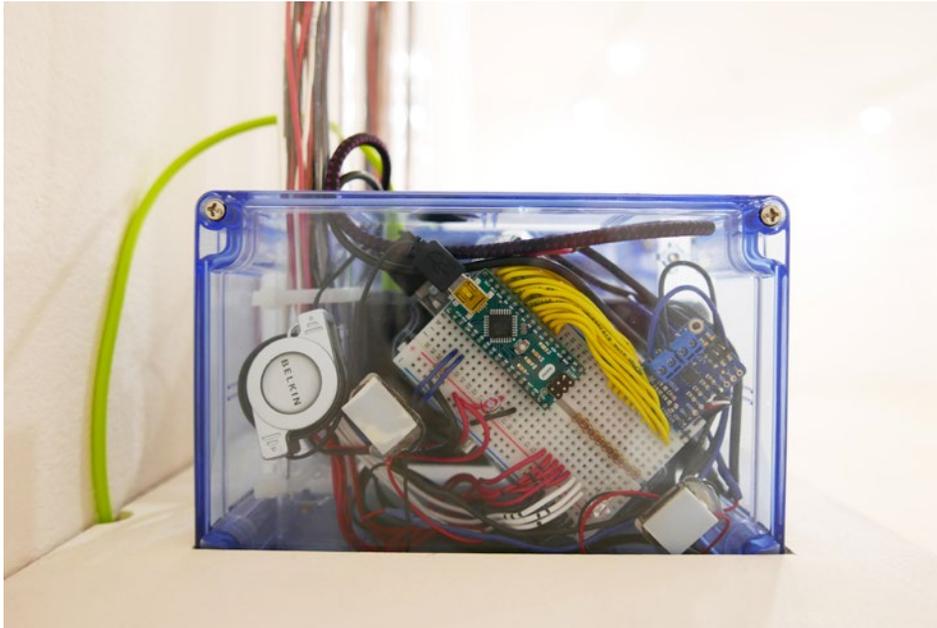
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*Vice*, April 3, 2015.

[https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/8gdwkp/gifted-dynamic-and-deaf-rising-star-christine-sun-kim-creates-art-that-reinvents-sound-679](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8gdwkp/gifted-dynamic-and-deaf-rising-star-christine-sun-kim-creates-art-that-reinvents-sound-679)

# Artist Profile: Christine Sun Kim

By [Elvia Wilk](#)  
Oct 30, 2015



*The latest in a series of interviews with artists who have a significant body of work that makes use of or responds to network culture and digital technologies.*

Your own physical presence seems integral to your work. Sometimes you are literally in the space, guiding people and forging an interaction—I think of *Gesture Sign Art* that I saw at Kunstlerhaus Bethanien in 2012, where you showed instructions on an iPad for viewers to manipulate transducers and piano wires in space to create vibrations together. At other times you leave objects in the space that show evidence of your actions, like the *Speaker Drawings* that manifested transducer vibrations on paper. Do you think of those projects in terms of action and evidence? Are they autonomous, or do they require you to activate them?

Some of my performances are about the process of building a platform and conducting participants to become my voice (*Subjective Loudness* in Tokyo, 2013) rather than leaving my traces afterwards. It seems as if my “voice” as an artist cannot be conveyed without all those people’s involvement. It’s almost a direct reflection of my everyday communication. I expand my voice through other voices.

The *Speaker Drawings* were my baby steps as a sound artist, and I don’t do them anymore. They were very straightforward: sound to visual. I’m so into the conceptual aspect of sound that these drawings almost feel like decoration, almost empty... or just a vessel. I like getting messy, though.



Christine Sun Kim, *Speaker Drawing*, (2012)

I met you while working for the Bard MFA program and was hired to be your note taker—I would transcribe all your studio visits with professors and afterwards you would read how the conversation had been translated through your interpreter from ASL [American Sign Language] to spoken English. I suddenly understood to what extent all communication is mediated artificially, and also confronted issues of accessibility for the first time. Do you think you're placed in an "educative" role by default in an art world where accessibility is so rarely part of the conversation?

Oh yes. I often tell my friends that I am an educator by default. Sometimes I enjoy that, sometimes not. Most art museum websites have videos and audio files that everyday people can easily watch/listen to, but I could safely say that 95% of them aren't accessible to everyone. So my art knowledge sometimes stops right there (apart from internet-ing or dialogue). If it weren't for the museum job I had at the Whitney, giving tours for deaf audiences, I wouldn't have had access to amazing documents such as research packets on special exhibitions, transcripts of curators' walkthrough tours, and exhibition catalogs. What blows my mind is that the art world is full of people claiming that they're open minded about "differences" or "challenges" and call themselves innovative. But when it comes to requesting minor adjustments such as adding captions, they bite my head off—there's so much discomfort in that space. I know accessibility can be such an ugly word—even I try to avoid it. "Universal design?" That can really water down other people's work, and mine. There needs to be much more space for us to experiment and try new ideas for making art inclusive. That would also push art/ideas much further with new questions.



Christine Sun Kim, *Face Opera II*, (2013)

Audiences are often struck when watching an ASL interpreter by how much sign-based communication depends on facial expression. You commented on that with *Face Opera* (2013), in which you and a group of deaf participants used only your faces (and some typed messages on an iPad) to build a soundless operatic narrative, cutting out the role of the interpreter altogether. Was this also a work about how much is lost in translation, about how much work sometimes goes into communication for you?

The audience's interpretations of my work largely depend on their understanding of my relationship with my interpreters. If you think the process involves transliteration (direct translation without considering its context, similar to Google Translate), then there's not much of a realization. The bottom line is that I'll never get the full information through an interpreter, but I have my own way of assessing what happened. For instance, at Bard, during a studio visit with a teacher, I would try to put everything together inside my head by watching my interpreter signing, seeing how my questions are being answered, figuring out how much I trusted my interpreter's interpretation, observing how the teacher behaved, reading your notes, reviewing the meeting with the interpreter to maximize my understanding, and taking in external details (i.e. gossip, ha ha). If the whole meeting had been conducted in full ASL (deaf teacher, deaf student), it would have been very straightforward—maybe less subjective. There is a lot of trust involved in my communication, as I constantly work with new interpreters, organizers, faculty members, and administrators. Sometimes it feels like dating my own voice; it's like being on a first date every day.

It seems that whenever I present my work as a "sound" piece, the audience is most likely to open their minds and look into their own subjectivities. A friend of mine mentioned that sometimes when you're supposed to "listen" to my work, the experience itself becomes the space for you to re-think your subjectivity. But sometimes I think musicians or sound artists have the privilege of being misunderstood, or not understood. In my case, I have a fear of not being understood, which means I get trapped in your subjectivity, not the other way around.



Christine Sun Kim, *Subjective Loudness* (performance installation at Sound Live Tokyo, 2013. Photo: Masahide Ando)

You've been a TED fellow and a guest artist at MIT Media Lab, and done all sorts of collaborations with science and tech. Not that there needs to be any separation between aspects of your life and work, but is there any difference in the way your work evolves and is received in those contexts versus the art world, which is often pretty hermetic? What emerged from TED and MIT, and how has it fed into what you create for art institutions?

My work has always been in between disciplines and categories. For a long time, I wanted to stay inside the "art world" (maybe for the sake of belonging or earning respect), but it seems that my work resonates with many non-art communities. When I first was awarded a fellowship from TED, I wasn't sure what to make of it because I thought it was corporate and didn't want to be associated with it... But I went for it. That was an eye-opener for me because TED has a massive, powerful platform full of resources and people who are totally into new ideas, and I felt they really listened to what I had to say. The experience itself helped me realize that the model of being an artist in the art world doesn't fly with me. I had to step out of that community and explore new models for my art. With MIT, it's too early to tell what will come of it, since it just started this year. So far no specific projects have come from either fellowship, though they do offer leverage, opportunities, networks, friends, and resources. I feel more hyperconnected than ever and it's scaring me a little.

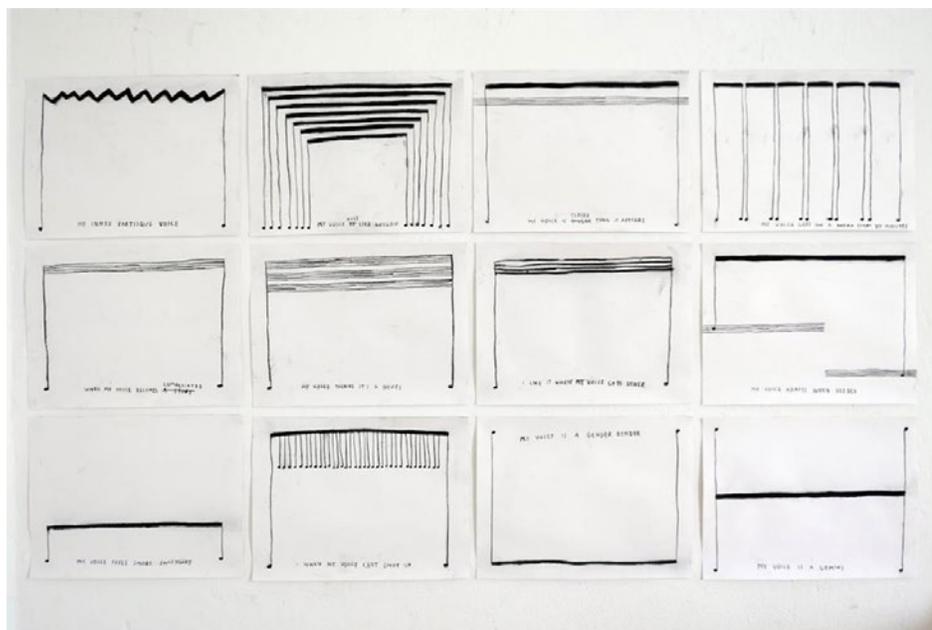
In your installation *Game of Skill 2.0* for the "Greater New York" installation at MoMA PS1, the audience is invited to drive a radio along a cable line, changing the sound of the voice coming from the radio according to their walking speed and direction. It seems like this work is geared more towards a hearing audience; do you feel the need to make your art accessible for all, despite the fact that the hearing world is not made entirely accessible for you?

I remember a time at Bard when I did a total sound piece and I felt conflicted about my work not being 100% accessible (as you said, I am an educator by default) and my co-chair, Marina Rosenfeld, said "Are you making art for yourself, or them?" She was right to ask. I started focusing on what interests me, and when there are deaf people in the

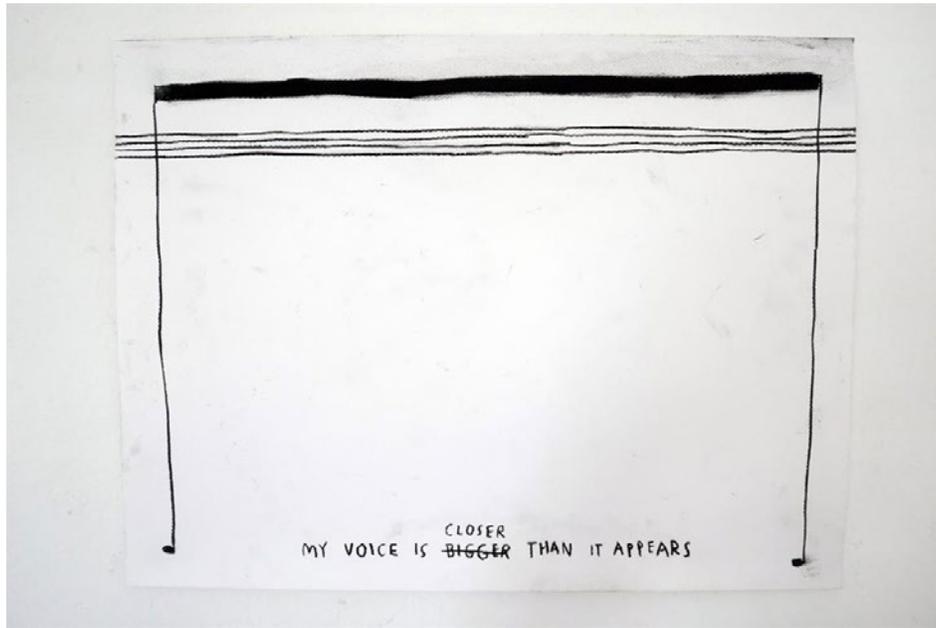
audience, I always make time to explain to them my process and what my hopes are. As long as they learn about the concept in ASL, they will have the same experience as hearing people, just on a different level. I did a video of myself explaining *Game of Skill 2.0* at MoMA PS1 except that it has no spoken English or captions. Hearing participants listen with their ears and deaf participants with their eyes.

I am amazed at how much feedback I've received from the show at PS1. I was there on the opening day with two interpreters, and I noticed that people with sensitive hearing could hear the voice coming from the radio very clearly (my text is about the future of NYC) and that people with less sensitive hearing found her voice less clear. It shows that everyone hears at various levels, like different small amounts of deafness. But they all need to learn how to walk and hold up a device in a particular way to hear full sentences; they function like human turntable needles. It takes practice. Also, it was funny to watch people getting very self-conscious about their new "listening" skill. They were saying, "Am I doing it right? Stop looking at me!"

For my solo show at Carroll Fletcher this fall, I'll show both *Game of Skill 1.0*, an earlier version originally shown at White Space in Beijing, and new drawings. The older devices used in the first *Game of Skill* have external speakers and two batteries instead of one. Both versions were built by electronic instrument designer Levy Lorenzo. And at Sound Live Tokyo also this fall, I will host a concert-like event with curator Tomoyuki Arai's help. We've invited musicians to contribute audio files of 20 decibels and below. The sounds are below your average hearing range, and they're full of beats that will be mostly transmitted through materials such as the walls and floor. Let's hope no ears will bleed.



Christine Sun Kim, new drawings to be shown at Carroll Fletcher as part of the exhibition "Rustle Tustle"



Christine Sun Kim, new drawing to be shown at Carroll Fletcher as part of the exhibition "Rustle Tustle"

### **Questionnaire:**

Age: 35

Location: Berlin, Germany

How/when did you begin working creatively with technology?

I've had a TTY (deaf phone, very '80s and '90s) and internet almost all my life. But when I got my first iPhone in 2011, it really changed the way I interact with non-signers and I started to incorporate it into performances. I never work with an interpreter during performances, mainly because I prefer to have direct connection with audiences and remind them that I do not have a sonic identity.

Where did you go to school? What did you study?

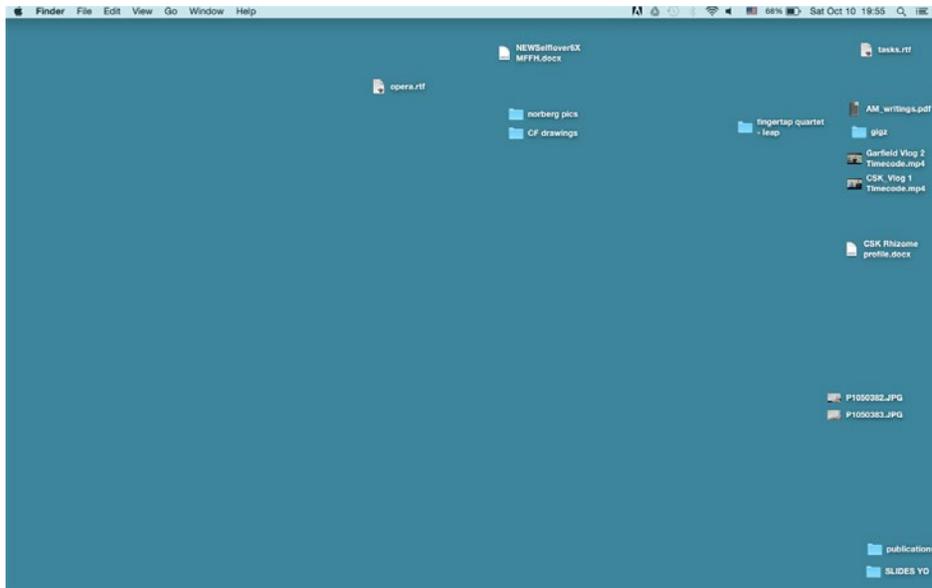
At Rochester Institute of Technology, a BS in Multi-Disciplinary Arts; an MFA in Studio Arts at the School of Visual Arts in New York and an MFA in Music/Sound at Bard College.

What do you do for a living or what occupations have you held previously?

I used to work as a digital archivist for W.W. Norton and Co., a publishing company, and as a freelance educator at the Whitney Museum.

What does your desktop or workspace look like? (Pics or screenshots please!)

Living room as temporary studio for three days before my next trip. I was never an artist with a permanent studio, but I hope that will change soon.



Desktop—I try to keep it clear, easier for me to navigate. I like studios and desktops that look almost empty because it helps me think clearly.

Wilk, Elvia. “Artist Profile: Christine Sun Kim.”  
*Rhizome*, October 30, 2015.

<http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/oct/30/artist-profile-christine-sun-kim/>

# Interview

## THE AURAL ARTIST

By [Emily McDermott](#)  
Photography Robert Bellamy

Published December 14, 2015



CHRISTINE SUN KIM IN LONDON, NOVEMBER 2015. PHOTOS: ROBERT BELLAMY. STYLING: NATLIE BREWSTER. HAIR: FEDERICO GHEZZI/W-M MANAGEMENT. MAKEUP: EMILY MERGAERT USING MAC COSMETICS AND RADICAL SKINCARE.

Upon walking into a small room at MoMA PS1, visitors are given Lucite boxes that are filled with complex wiring and have two-foot tall antenna-like protrusions. Hanging overhead are three taut wires covered in blue Velcro. The goal is to continuously walk while keeping the antenna touching the Velcro, triggering magnetic sensors along the way. When doing so, a robotic voice begins to speak and the faster one walks, the faster the voice talks. Walking backward inverts the

vocal output. Although the task seems simple, maintaining contact between the antenna and wire is a frustrating endeavor—and as soon as the two are disconnected, the audio restarts. This feeling of frustration and defeat, however, is exactly what sound artist Christine Sun Kim wants to elicit with *Game of Skill 2.0*.

“It’s so easy for hearing people to take for granted what they hear,” says Kim, who was born deaf. “Having a TV on in the background, having a radio on, maybe even overhearing things in a restaurant, things that you pick up incidentally—this project forces you to think about what you’re hearing and really try to make sense of it.”

Recently relocated from New York to Berlin (“I just fell in love with somebody and decided to move”), Kim has only been a full-time artist for two years. Prior to quitting her day job in publishing, in her spare time, she created drawings, installations, performances, and paintings that explored the concept of sound, but nothing quite as technologically intricate as *Game of Skill*. Version *2.0* follows *1.0*, which is currently on view at Carroll / Fletcher gallery in London, as part of Kim’s inaugural exhibition in the U.K., “Rustle Tustle.”



To Kim, who was born in California and received MFAs from both Bard College and the School of Visual Arts, the lack of sound never means silence. “I try as much as I can to combat the idea of deaf people being the ‘silent ones,’ or the misconception of how deaf people know silence very well,” the 35-year-old says. “I want to avoid silence.” Summating this view, her drawing *Pianoiss...issimo (Worse Finish)* presents a binary decision diagram composed entirely of p’s, with each layer representing a sound becoming fainter and fainter but never fully disappearing. This drawing, among others, was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2013, prior to which she completed residencies with institutions like the Whitney Museum and TED.

Now, Kim is expanding upon collaborations (she’s previously worked with

musicians such as Dev Hynes), preparing a new iteration of her *Face Opera* with British Sign Language rather than American, and continuing her TED and MIT Media Lab fellowships. Late last month, we Skyped with Kim and translator Dylan Geil, whose impeccably quick and smooth translations allowed the conversation to proceed without any lull.

EMILIY MCDERMOTT: Congratulations on “Rustle Tustle” and your U.K. debut. Can you tell me a little bit about the general inspiration behind the new works on view?

CHRISTINE KIM: With the show in London, the general concept is about how I need to borrow somebody else’s voice just to have a voice as an artist. The word “voice” can be very abstract. Voice can mean your literal voice, but you can also have a voice through writing, through work, or through other mediums. In the work that I do, it’s important to have an actual literal voice.

Growing up, I always had to communicate through somebody else, through a sign language interpreter, through a friend, through a partner. Of course there’s other ways to communicate on my own—by writing back and forth with someone or simple gestures—but the world was not designed for deaf people or for sign language. So I became obsessed with how to collaborate and partner with people to communicate, and lately I’ve been working with musicians and borrowing their voices. I find that music has a lot of social currency, so the more I collaborate with interpreters or musicians, and even with other artists, my voice actually grows.

The exhibition has a few new drawings that I’m introducing. I have a few transcripts or visual scores. I draw a lot about the experience of using different interpreters and their voices and how that impacts my own image. Sometimes interpreters’ voices make me feel short; sometimes interpreters’ voices make me feel very gabby. Each voice gives me a different sensation, so I’m thinking about voices as literal representations of things. Plus, I have a few new drawings related to sign language and actual signs. How we modify signs is by facial expressions. Time is actually represented on a horizontal scale—future is in front of your body and past is behind your body. [*does signs for “future” and “past”*] I was recently in Beijing and it kept coming up, all of the different versions of the future you can have. So I brought those drawings from Beijing and am introducing some about the past.

MCDERMOTT: *Game of Skill 1.0* is also in London and *Game of Skill 2.0* is currently part of “Greater New York” at MoMA PS1. What’s the difference between the two versions?

KIM: The concept is exactly the same, the only thing that’s different is a little bit of the engineering. I started thinking about this project five years ago and it’s finally come to life. I don’t want to give it away, but I was thinking about “you” as the guider of your own experience, like the needle on a turntable for a

record. Depending on how the record is spinning and how you, the needle, are interacting, it can change the sound quality. It's a very delicate balance, and in this game of skill, you act as the needle.

MCDERMOTT: When you first started thinking about *Game of Skill* five years ago, what was the starting point?

KIM: Five years ago I started grad school [at Bard] and was thinking about making it, but I was really thinking about making it as analog as possible because that's what was popular at the time, and because I find it a bit easier to follow, how physical materials work together. Some people thought I should use a tape cassette and etch everything into the cassette, but other people had already done that, and it has technical limits that I couldn't work with. You cannot be loose or flexible when using it. At the same time, it was suggested that I look into using a motion tracking camera, where audio comes out depending on your movements, but that feels fake and I wanted the experience to be as authentic as possible. The more analog the idea is, the harder it is to build and engineer. I'm not technical at all; I'm not tech savvy. But I happen to have a lot of tech friends that support me, so I got lucky in that sense. I met the technician Levy Lorenzo through HarvestWorks and we finally developed this idea.

MCDERMOTT: When you travel, like going to Beijing, what is translation like? I know there is International Sign, but I imagine having American Sign Language as a first language makes it difficult..

KIM: That's really tough to answer because I only became a full-time artist two years ago. Before, I had my 9-to-5 and then I would focus on my art and do a residency here and there...It's kind of piecemeal how things come together in terms of interpreters. If the organization or institution is willing to tack on additional budget for an interpreter, then I'm obviously going to bring an interpreter with me. But that's rare because interpreters are expensive. You're adding a flight ticket, you're adding their labor, and usually, budgets are set for the entire year and there's no flexibility. I was recently in Norway and had to get my friend from Sweden to come in and interpret for a short time.

Most of the time I have interpreters when I'm in America because there's the Americans with Disabilities Act and things regulating communication interpretation. It's much less likely in other countries, so I'm starting to not view that as a barrier anymore. I'm starting to give talks without interpreters, although this isn't ideal or preferred. I'm a very fast typer, so I will type my speech and it comes up like a scrolling PowerPoint. I might even have two projectors: one for what I want to showcase and one for words I want to say.

When I was in Beijing, it was a very intense, almost overwhelming, experience. Only one individual that I was working with spoke English. I had to write a lot, I had to use international and Chinese gestures... Having an interpreter is best for me, because I feel that is the quickest route of communication and access with ease, but I know that it's not going to be possible to have an interpreter at all

times, so I make the best of whatever situation I'm in.

MCDERMOTT: You mentioned all of the various things you consider voices, like writing and works. When you use typing as a voice, how does it feel? What is that voice like for you?

KIM: Sometimes I feel it enhances the communication with the audience because there is no intermediary in that situation, but sometimes I'm just at a loss as to how to explain a concept in English, my second language. I was recently in Japan and there was one interpreter who knew American Sign Language, Japanese Sign Language, English, and Japanese, which is damn impressive. But, they didn't know the art lingo very well. They were new to that vocabulary and the jargon that comes with it, so I felt like my message, while it was interpreted, was watered down. In cases like this, sometimes I'll type in English and then interpreters will translate from English into spoken languages—spoken Japanese, spoken Chinese. That's another way I use interpreters in my work. In England, they use British Sign Language, which is completely different than American Sign Language. They follow completely different grammar structures and use different signs.

MCDERMOTT: In your TED talk you said that sound is a movement, that you feel movement with sound. Can you talk about that feeling and what exactly it means?

KIM: When I'm talking about sound as movement, I'm not thinking of that as being vibration. It's not like I hear a speaker and I feel it. It's more the actual movement—signing, people moving, head nodding—that is sound to me. In terms of how I put that in my art, I incorporate it as an idea or as a concept. But I want to be clear: it is not vibration.

MCDERMOTT: You've said that when growing up, there was a moment where you figured out you could use sound to either disempower or empower you. You obviously chose to use it to empower yourself. How did that lead to your interest in art?

KIM: I do a lot of interviews and I feel like I answer the same questions differently each time! Now I'm almost a little bit confused as to how I became interested in art. [*laughs*] I think the bottom line is that it felt natural to me. I think I always wanted to be an artist growing up. I always sucked at everything else. I was horrible at science. I couldn't do math. The one thing I was good at and that I had an interest in was art.

MCDERMOTT: Do you remember an artist or experience that was an influential moment?

KIM: I've been thinking about that question for a long time. The educational system here in the United States doesn't really have a robust art program. When I was young, I grew up in a mainstream setting. I went to school with other hearing children. I was one of the only deaf kids at the school, so I worked with

interpreters. Depending on who the interpreter was, it influenced the route of my education, and I actually never had an art class. I would always ask for art, but they couldn't find an interpreter to cover the art class. When I finally went to the Rochester Institute of Technology, I decided to take a night class on art, and they said, "Nope! We can't get an interpreter to fill that class." So again, I was shut out of the art world. It wasn't until that I went to the School of Visual Arts that I finally was exposed to art in a formal setting. It might have been those barriers in my childhood, and even in my college career, that really shifted me toward wanting to make it in art. I didn't grow up looking to a specific artist or knowing that artists struggled or could "make it;" those concepts were skipped over. They had to be learned in grad school.

MCDERMOTT: Aside from these barriers and the concept of sound, what drives your creativity?

KIM: I got a second MFA in Music and Sound at Bard and John Cage was frequently brought up as a major reference from the '50s, when his work was really breaking musical barriers. He started breaking all of the rules associated with sound and sound etiquette. Before John Cage, I think people often associated silence with deafness. I think it's very romantic or becomes almost a gimmick that people hinge on. So I was reading his book *Silence* and I couldn't relate to the ideas he was expressing. I understood that silence was shaped by sound and we use sound to define silence, or vice versa, but that didn't help me understand sound or silence. I felt like I had to do my own exploration of what sound meant for me, before I could delve into the concepts he was laying out in the book.

MCDERMOTT: So after starting to read the book, what were some of the first things you did to start exploring and understand silence?

KIM: Before that I had never thought about it. I always thought sound was something I couldn't touch with rubber gloves and a 10-foot pole. The deaf community can be very contained, very insular. I understood that behavior very well; I knew that deaf people congregated with other deaf people. It's because there wasn't a lot of social space created for us in the world and by virtue of that we had to hang out together, but I didn't explore sound.

In terms of how I started to explore sound, I had speech therapy for a while and that might have been my first exposure to sound. I had to look at hearing individuals to get feedback about how I was pronouncing certain words. Their facial expressions would tell me if I was doing it correctly or incorrectly. They became my speakers, and I learned how to manipulate my own behavior in order to get positive reactions from those speakers. I used that experience, applied it to the art world, and started exploring sound within my work.

I think my whole intention was to fight against the concept of "the other" and I want to mention the fourth part of the exhibition in London. I watched a movie

called *Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter* and thought, “The movie wasn’t bad but the captions are wonderful.” They have descriptions of all the sound that is happening. It’s almost *too much* information. It’s like, “Sound of man writing on paper.” Instead of “the sounds of the city,” it’s like the city’s waking up, a door slams, the rain hits the window. It highlighted the different sounds that are possible in a city. So I worked with four captioners, they’re all deaf and my friends, and I pulled scenes from five different movies to have them caption the sound. Like, what’s the word that we use to describe the sound of the moment you have an idea? It’s going to be very playful, very jovial, but this is another way to express my voice and their voices.

MCDERMOTT: What are the five movies?

KIM: I’m not sure if I should release the names or if it should be a mystery... There’s one Greek movie, *Dogtooth*, and I’ve been fascinated by one scene where there’s a man and woman getting in a fight. The kids are at home and the father, not wanting to yell, just mouths words rather than actually screams because he doesn’t want to wake the kids. The woman, in return, responds [the same way]. So it’s two people going [*moves mouth without speaking*]. That movie has captions that provide the content of what they’re saying, but I thought it might have been more effective if they didn’t. The five scenes that I’ve chosen, while they’re all different, their connection lies in the fact that they’re representing voice in a different way.

MCDERMOTT: I know you’re working on a new *Face Opera* with British Sign Language. What is that process like since you don’t speak it fluently?

KIM: Two of the British deaf people are fluent in American Sign Language, so I’m able to communicate in American Sign Language and then they translate into British Sign Language. It also helps that I know BSL well enough to carry a conversation. The point of *Face Opera* is that I perform the whole score just with your face. I conduct people’s faces rather than people’s voices. It’s a little bit comical.

MCDERMOTT: You’re also about to go to Sound Live Tokyo for the second year in a row...

KIM: I’m doing a project called *Bounce House*. I’ve pulled together different musicians and invited them to make sound files, but these files all occur at below 20 hertz so it’s not in your audible range. It hits you at a much deeper level and doesn’t come across as an audible sound. You actually hear the song through other things moving—when the song plays, the table will vibrate or the box will vibrate and that’s where you hear the sound, rather than from the speakers themselves.

MCDERMOTT: Are musicians open to this idea?

KIM: Some musicians were a bit uncomfortable, but they were excited. It's a challenge working with these musicians and technologists because they're not used to working with things outside of their audible range, and I don't know what it sounds like or what the actual experience is! *[laughs]* So I rely on their feedback to make that kind of sound. It's been a great experience collaborating with these people, especially Sound Live Tokyo's curator Tomoyuki Arai, as he has been instrumental throughout the process.

MCDERMOTT: It seems like that would be such a challenge, both for you and your collaborators. I feel like there could be a lot of miscommunication because no one can actually hear what's happening...

KIM: The interesting thing is that it's not a challenge because it puts us on the same playing field. If we both can't hear it, then nobody's above anyone else in terms of giving feedback. I think it puts us on equal footing, we judge it or equalize it in the same way through the vibrations or feeling we get.

MCDERMOTT: How do you select the people you want to work with?

KIM: Some musicians are friends of mine that want to partner and collaborate with me, and some the other way around. We think about our aesthetics, and if we have the same aesthetic, then it's clear that a collaboration could be just fine. But at the same time, if we're just friends and want to work together then we'll make something happen. Sometimes I'm partnering with musicians and people that are a little bit above my pedigree, so to speak. Most of the time the collaboration comes from, "Do I like you?" If I like you, then we're going to collaborate. That's the litmus test.

MCDERMOTT: I know you don't like it when a reporter writes "the deaf artist who works with sound" or "the sound artist who can't hear," so if you had to define yourself, what would you say?

KIM: *[pauses]* I'm struggling with that, actually. I know that articles need bait. You've got to put the bait out there in the title, otherwise no one's going to click it. But at the same time, I don't have a good way to bill myself, I guess. You can just use my name.

*"RUSTLE TUSTLE" WILL BE ON VIEW AT CARROLL / FLETCHER IN LONDON THROUGH JANUARY 30, 2016. "GREATER NEW YORK" WILL BE ON VIEW AT MOMA PS1 IN NEW YORK THROUGH MARCH 7, 2016. FOR MORE ON THE ARTIST, VISIT HER WEBSITE.*

McDermott, Emily. "The Aural Artist."  
*Interview Magazine*, December 14, 2015.

[https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/christine-sun-kim-16-faces-of-2016#slide-show\\_48232.5](https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/christine-sun-kim-16-faces-of-2016#slide-show_48232.5)

## How We Listen Determines What We Hear: Christine Sun Kim on Her Recent Sound Works, Working With Blood Orange

BY *Vida Weisblum* POSTED 09/28/15 11:47 AM



Christine Sun Kim.  
COURTESY SARA LINDEROTH

“I’m beginning to think I have two voices, like two different realities that are far from each other, but in the same place,” the sound artist Christine Sun Kim once wrote, referring to her artistic voice and her actual one. While every artist has to work out the difference between those two voices, the issue is particularly complicated in Kim’s case since she is pre-lingually deaf, a fact that has dominated much of the writing about her work, sometimes overshadowing the bracingly innovative nature of her achievements.

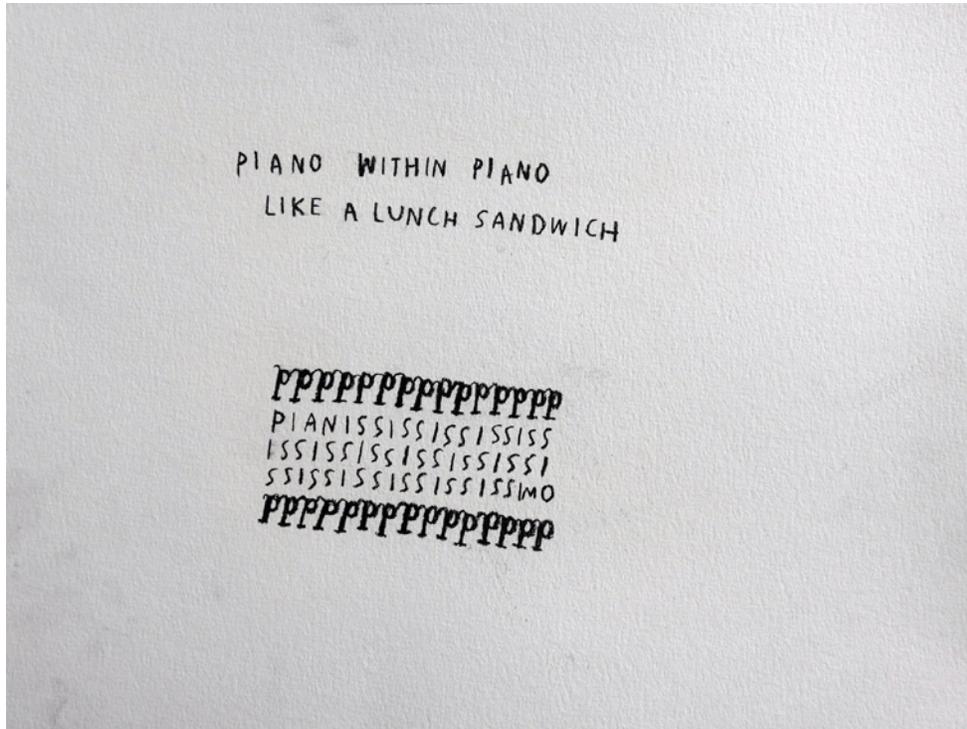
Sound art has long been located on the periphery of the contemporary art world—hard to define, tricky to study, and almost impossible to monetize, but Kim, who is 35, is among a new generation of practitioners who are gaining more mainstream attention. She has been included in shows at the Museum of Modern Art and the New Museum, and was named a 2015 Media Lab Director’s Fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology earlier this year. Next month she will appear in MoMA PS1’s closely watched survey “Greater New York” in Queens.

Kim uses a *mélange* of visual and sound art tools in her unorthodox, defiant art. Her aim, she has said, is to “perceive sound without considering social norms”—a practice that she calls “unlearning sound etiquette.”

“I know exactly how to behave in certain situations, such as being super quiet when someone’s asleep in the house, or how you’re expected to laugh aloud at stand-up

comedy shows,” she told me in an email, providing examples of that etiquette. Her art questions the way hearing people are trained to make and relate to sound.

“I’m trying to unlearn what I’ve been taught by others and trying to find my own definition of both sound and silence,” she told me.



Christine Sun Kim, *piano within piano*, 2015.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

That unlearning helped inform a relatively recent work: two years ago, Kim’s friend and collaborator Thomas Benno Mader told her that she sounded as if she had “a very heavy weight” on her chest while she was concentrating. (“Concentration suffocation” is how Mader described it to Kim.) Mader’s remark inspired them to make a new recorded work, *While Not Concentrated*, for which Kim attempted to reenact the sounds. The piece sounds like a heavy stream of vocal fry and breathing, but rather than document the sounds Kim makes while concentrating, it underscores the idea that a voice cannot actually be reproduced. “I constantly physically feel all kinds of sound coming out of my vocal chords,” Kim has said. “But whenever I’m not conscious of my own voice box, I make a completely different set of sounds that I am neither aware of nor able to feel.”

A California native, Kim went to college at the Rochester Institute of Technology and she now splits her time between New York and Berlin. She dedicates almost all of her time to her work. “I have a hard time distinguishing art from non-art interests,” Kim told *ARTnews*.

Her ascent has been rapid. In 2012 TED named her a fellow, and the next year her work was included in MoMA’s 2013 “Soundings,” its first major survey of contemporary sound art. She has served as an artist in residence at numerous institutions while also developing American Sign Language programs at the Whitney Museum, where she has worked for the past decade.

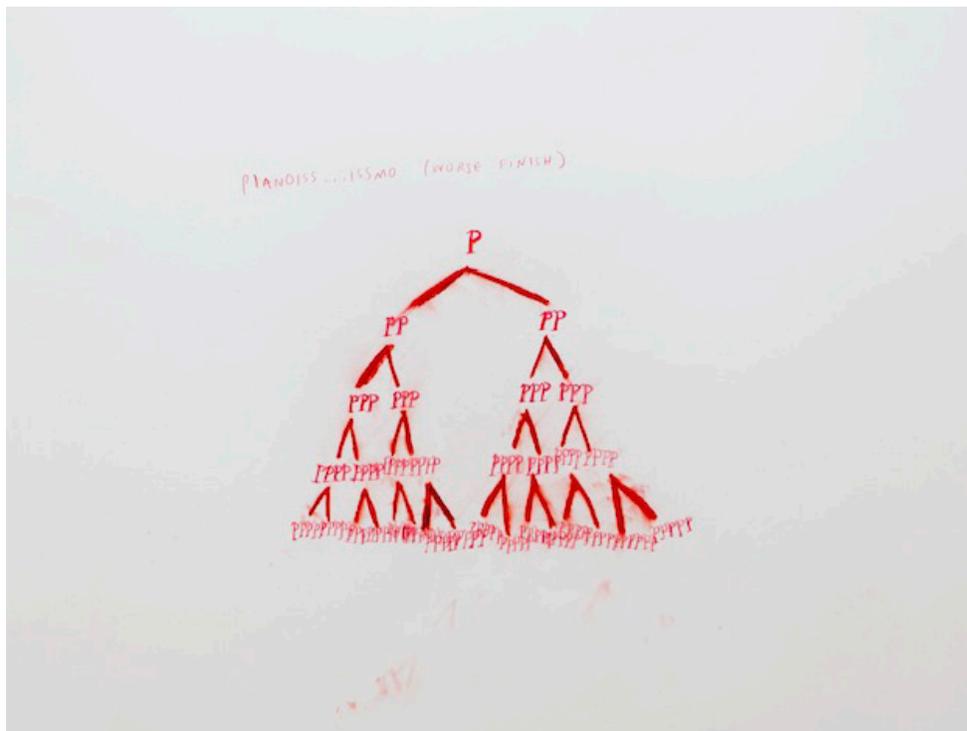
Although her practice is typically grouped in with sound art, Kim said that her work is

“generally hard to categorize” and “always in between.” Her projects typically involve audio components, but she employs sound in her work less as material to be heard than as something to be quantified, objectified, and presented in new ways.

And so it is perhaps not surprising that she started out as a painter. “It sure took me forever to find my way as an artist,” Kim said. “I naively thought that getting a master’s in visual arts would somehow make [me an] official [artist], but it didn’t.”

After earning an M.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts in New York, she decided to shift gears during a residency in Berlin. “Something clicked in my mind and I started using sound as my new medium,” she said. “But I was completely petrified because I wasn’t sure what it would bring me. In a way, I found my voice as an artist.”

At first, Kim generated abstract paintings by placing wet paintbrushes on top of vibrating subwoofers, using a variety of materials to create noise. She then developed an approach involving minimalist visual representations of sound, four of which were included in the MoMA sound survey. Barbara London, who organized the show, told me that she visited Kim’s studio and decided to include her in after becoming intrigued by Kim’s visual translations of sound. The pieces in the show were monochrome drawings made with a combination of marker, pastel, charcoal, and pencil on white paper that measure, in visual terms, her own interpretation of the sound. They seemed to fit one of London’s core themes for “Soundings” quite perfectly: “How we listen determines what we hear.”



Christine Sun Kim, *Pianoiss...issimo(worse finish)*, 2012.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

Kim’s sound drawings are counterintuitive and often playful. In *Pianoiss...issimo (Worse Finish)* (2012), she draws what looks like a flow chart with a *p*—for the dynamic *piano* (“quiet”)—at the top, which branches out to two *pps* (the quieter *pianissimo*), each of which in turn branches out into even quieter *ppps* (*pianississimo*) and so forth. It is a family tree of quietness.

Like musicians, perhaps more so than artists, Kim frequently collaborates with others. “Considering the fact that I do not speak with voice, it seems like working with others is the only way to stay relevant in society,” Kim said. “I think I get better at communicating after each collaborator,” she said. “[I am] definitely better at winning arguments.”

Another collaborator, Devonté Hynes, the British singer, composer, and producer known by the stage name Blood Orange, contributed prerecorded vocals for a witty live performance piece, *Fingertap Quartet* (2014) after Kim sent him a text. “I was a fan of her work before I became friends with her,” Hynes told *ARTnews* in an email. “I love the thought process and open-ended feeling to her work.” Hynes said that Kim gave him free reign to experiment, and that the process was fun. “Because of how much social status his voice has, it somehow validates my voice,” Kim said. While playing the four sound files she created by editing sounds Hynes provided with two small transducers (hence the title *Fingertap Quartet*), Kim provided a visual accompaniment by typing out emojis on a screen.



Christine Sun Kim, *Fingertap Quartet*, 2014.  
COURTESY THE ARTIST

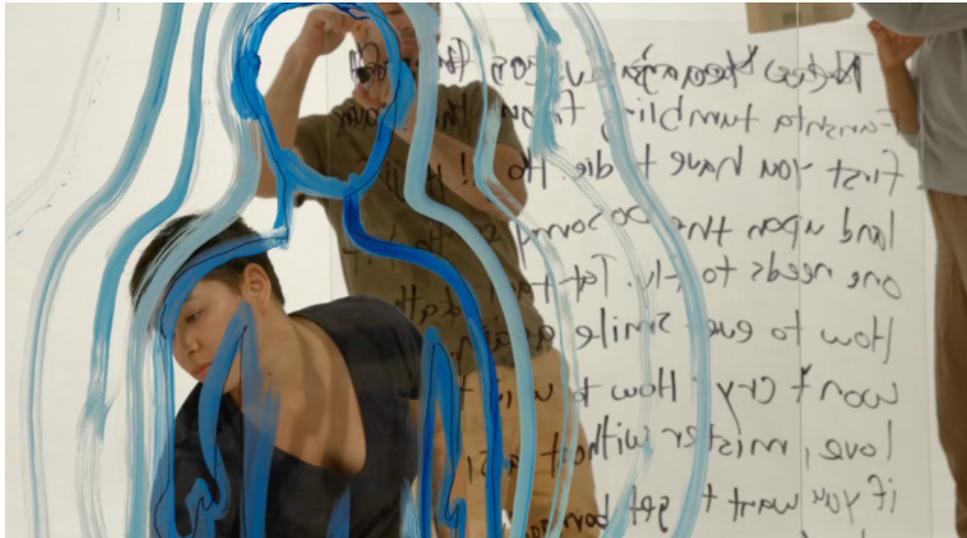
Mader, who has worked with Kim the most of anyone recently, first met her in Berlin three years ago. For *Recording Contract*, he switched on a sound recorder, wrapped it in bubble wrap and tape, and then shipped it from his Berlin residence to Kim in New York. When the recorder arrived, Kim deactivated the device and edited the sounds that it had captured during its journey. In order to objectify sound and treat it as a “physical phenomenon,” as Mader put it, the two artists then wrote an official-looking contract with specific rules, stipulating, for instance, that neither of the two would ever listen to the recording. The 24-hour recording of the piece is available on the website of *Bomb* magazine, which commissioned the work. Listening to the surprisingly intense cacophony of thumping, crunching, rustling, and human speech feels like eavesdropping on a private conversation.

Because few hearing people know sign language, Kim often uses Skype or iPhone apps in order to converse. “Technology provides temporary solutions to communication gaps and sometimes brings me much closer to people than via interpreters,” she said.

But those tools do not offer a perfect solution. “When the Internet first entered my life, it was so refreshing how nothing is compromised nor blocked and everyone gets the same information as I do,” Kim said. “It had, and still does have, so much influence on my identity, interaction, thinking, and art. However, more and more...the Internet just feels a little compromised, and not really magical anymore.”

“There’s always something in between myself and people, so that has made me think so much about ‘leasing’ people’s actual voices such as conducting audiences to become my ‘voice,’” Kim continued.

In her *face opera ii*, a live show, and one of Kim’s favorite works, she has a group of friends (all of whom are pre-lingually deaf and communicate in American Sign Language as their first language) sing with their mouths rather than sign with their hands. During the live show, the performers dressed in jeans and button-down T-shirts and stood in a pack with their hands in their pockets. In unison, they all mimicked a single conductor who used facial expressions and gesticulations to act out the stream of words and emotions that Kim scrolled through on a tablet. “I realized that music and ASL are very similar,” she said. “ASL is actually not as manual as many people think. I saw that we were able to get so much across to the audience just because of its musical format.”



A still from the 'Silence' section of Chelsea Knight's *Fall to Earth*, with Kim.  
COURTESY CHELSEA KNIGHT AND ASPECT/RATIO PROJECTS, CHICAGO

This summer, Kim collaborated with the New York-based artist Chelsea Knight, whose film project *Fall to Earth*, captured several live performances based on Salman Rushdie’s controversial seminal work *The Satanic Verses*. Chapters of the film aired at the New Museum in New York in separate installations of the 30-minute piece. Knight asked Kim for her input on “Silence,” the fifth and final chapter of the video, which involves actors “flying” from equipment attached to the ceiling. According to Knight, the piece is “about the ways in which language can be empowering but also treacherous, dangerous, obscuring, violent.” Knight said that she was interested in Kim’s perspective on language and speech, and that she exchanged ideas with her via Skype for nearly a year for the section about silence, which, in the end, was completely silent, including no ASL. “We wanted to talk about silence as a kind of speech, with [the] potential to be a ‘full’ entity,” Knight said. “A protest, a robust thing, not only a kind of lack.”

Weisblum, Vida. “How We Listen Determines What We Hear: Christine Sun Kim on Her Recent Sound Works, Working With Blood Orange.” *ArtNews*, September 28, 2015.  
<http://www.artnews.com/2015/09/28/how-we-listen-determines-what-we-hear-christine-sun-kim-on-her-recent-sound-works-teaming-with-blood-orange/>

# ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

## CHRISTINE SUN KIM

November 25, 2015 • Christine Sun Kim talks about her exhibition in London



Christine Sun Kim, *Face Opera II*, 2015. Rehearsal view, November 25, 2015.

*Artist Christine Sun Kim has deployed a range of media, from drawings to electronic devices, to explore sound as a medium, particularly from her perspective as a deaf artist. Her upcoming exhibition at Carroll / Fletcher in London will reprise a work currently on view at “Greater New York” in MoMA PS1, and will also include new pieces, which she discusses below. The show, which runs from November 27, 2015 to January 30, 2016, will also feature a performance, Face Opera: Thumbs Up, on Thursday, November 26, at 7:30 PM.*

**OVER TIME**, I’ve found myself starting to understand the lingo of sound and music more and more, especially in terms of quantitative forms like decibel and hertz. I’m beginning to find music much more personal, mainly because of the musicians I’ve befriended in the past two years. My upcoming show will feature *Game of Skill 1.0*, 2015, which is actually an a predecessor of *Game of Skill 2.0*, which New York museumgoers can experience at MoMA PS1 right now.. I like how super analog *1.0* is, especially with its visible external speakers, as opposed to built-in ones. However, both versions offer the same or similar listening experience. Each piece was built by my technician Levy Lorenzo. I hope the *Game of Skill 1.0* installation will encourage participants to listen like gamers, or human turntable needles. In it, you hold up a device that connects to a strip of Velcro with magnets above you, and then you physically walk around in order to listen to audio, which is controlled by the device and its responses to your movement The audio comes out in a way that’s affected by the way you move, walk, or hold the device. It takes practice to perfect; it might be laborious but it’s meant to make your listening feel unfamiliar and like you’re learning a skill. This partially came from my observation of how hearing people passively and mindlessly listen, which I think is something they often take for granted.

*Face Opera*, 2013/2015, is another piece I've already done twice with a group of deaf friends in New York. This upcoming performance will involve a group of deaf Brits, which I'm incredibly excited about. Two of them are my good friends and I know British Sign Language (entirely different from American Sign Language) enough to carry conversations. Those participants have helped me develop the score and will sing with their faces alone, rather than hands. In BSL, there is a strong use of thumbs to express everyday concepts like "good night" (thumb up, night), "my dinner is great" (dinner, thumb up), or "all right" (two thumbs up), hence the latest iteration's title, *Face Opera: Thumbs Up*.

In terms of new work, I'll be exhibiting a series of drawings that is mostly about my relationship with ASL interpreters, as well as *Close Readings*, a project that has a lot to do with how necessary it is to work with other voices in order to have one. This piece came from my experience of reading rather than watching a movie called *Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter* (2014). Their captioner went overboard and captioned almost every single sound in it, in a way that made the captions seem imposing, specific, and abstract. I realized from this that sound can be incredibly multidimensional and how difficult it is to put them into a few words. It also made me understand that for many years I've been placing so much trust in captioners to decide which sounds are important. For example, if Rihanna's "BBHMM" comes up in a scene, a captioner could easily describe it as a "song in background" instead of specifying which song, musician, instruments, or even lyrics. My perception of movies largely depends on those captioners, just like my perceptions of spoken conversations depend on my sign language interpreters. I invited four deaf friends to add their own sound cues to five movie scenes I selected that resonate with the theme of voice; they were asked to provide captions that were either literal, conceptual, or imagined.

Ultimately I think my main interest driving this show is the notion of going overboard: overreading movie captions, overlistening while playing games, overthinking about all the different voices I've worked with. Maybe it's more about borrowing voices, and about how people perhaps overvalue voice as a sound rather than voice as a visual.

— *As told to Dawn Chan*

Chan, Dawn. "Interviews: Christine Sun Kim"  
*Artforum*, November 25, 2015.

<https://www.artforum.com/interviews/christine-sun-kim-talks-about-her-exhibition-in-london-56374>