



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