

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.

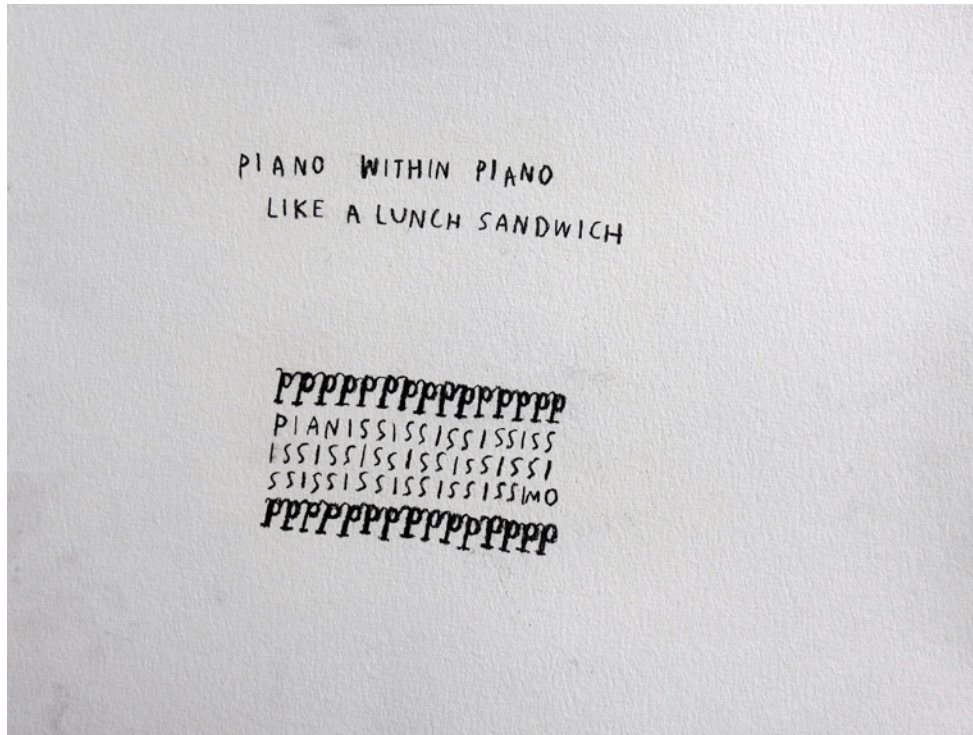
Sound art has long been located on the periphery of the contemporary art world—hard to define, tricky to study, and almost impossible to monetize, but Kim, who is 35, is among a new generation of practitioners who are gaining more mainstream attention. She has been included in shows at the Museum of 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.

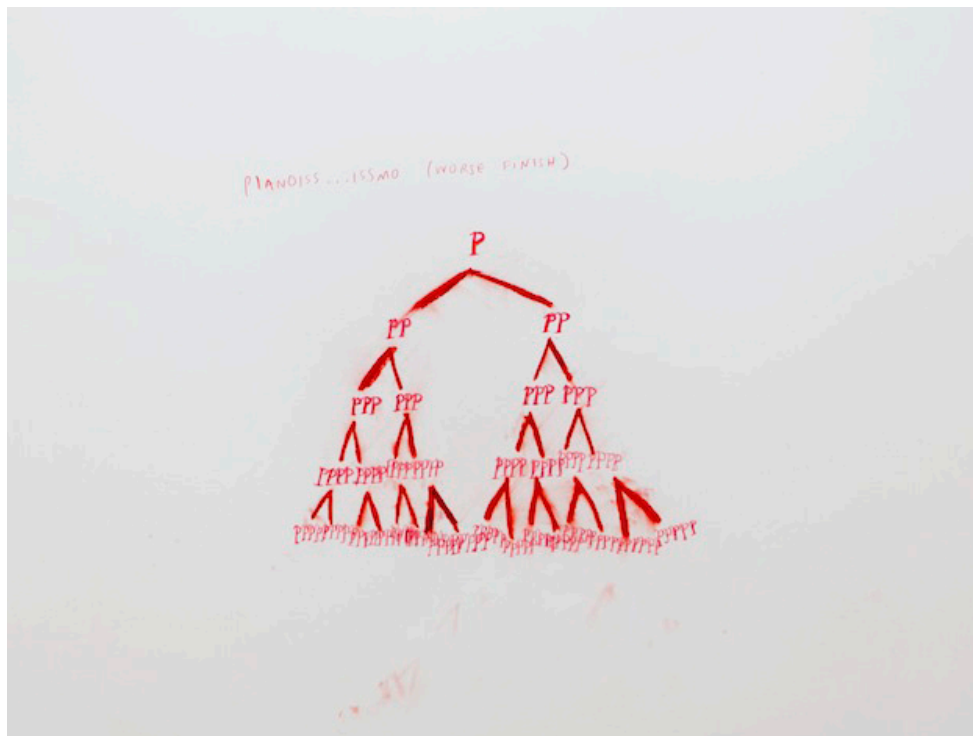
Although her practice is typically grouped in with sound art, Kim said that her work is

“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.”

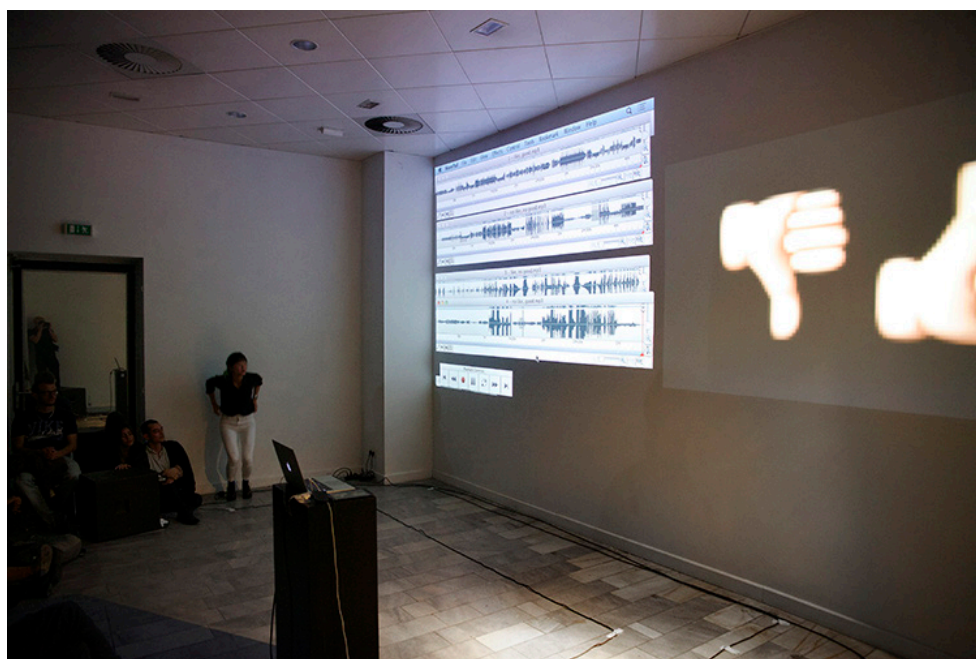


Christine Sun Kim, *Pianoiss...issimo(worse finish)*, 2012.
COURTESY THE ARTIST

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

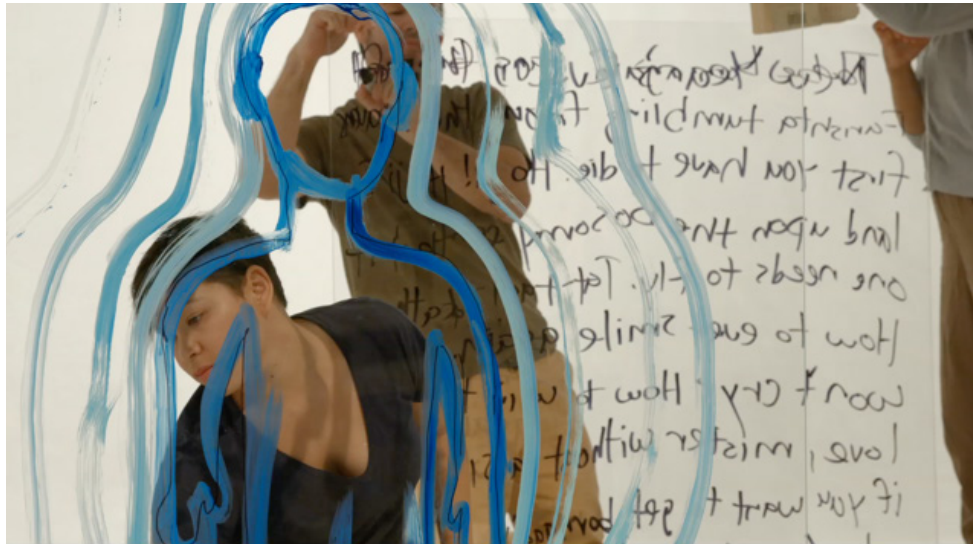
Mader, who has worked with Kim the most of anyone recently, first met her in Berlin three years ago. For *Recording Contract*, he switched on a sound recorder, wrapped it in bubble wrap and tape, and then shipped it from his Berlin residence to Kim in New York. When the recorder arrived, Kim deactivated 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.”

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<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/>