

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/>