



In Berlin, a group of both Deaf and hearing creatives have found a common vocabulary.

From left: **EMILY McDERMOTT**, writer and editor, hearing, 29; **LUCAS ODAHARA**, artist, hearing, 32; **MEG STUART**, dancer, choreographer and director, hearing, 56; **YOUKA SNELL**, instrumentalist, vocalist and songwriter, hearing, 35; **ACE MAHBAB**, actor, Deaf, 34; **CHRISTOPHER TESTER**, actor, sign language interpreter, student, Deaf, 39; **CHRISTINE SUN KIM**, artist, Deaf, 40; and **THOMAS MADER**, artist (and Kim's husband), hearing, 37. Photographed at Lobe Block/Terrassenhaus Berlin on Feb. 27, 2021.

INTERVIEWS BY GISELA WILLIAMS  
PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA SELLMANN

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**Christine Sun Kim:** Growing up, I struggled to communicate and develop friendships with hearing peers, but then I went to college and became more comfortable with my signing and myself. Then I went to grad school, and my A.S.L. bubble popped. I learned I had a skill with strangers. I realized that small talk with hearing strangers was an opportunity for them to see me. And if I saw that they weren't interested in me, I knew they weren't worth my time, and it didn't hurt my feelings — it was the filter I needed. Now when my friends and I are together, we communicate using a combination of American Sign Language (A.S.L.), German Sign Language (D.G.S.), international signs and [the messaging app] Cardzilla.

**Thomas Mader:** When you get along with someone and share a sense of humor, that sensibility becomes part of your common vocabulary. That happens in our family, as well. For example, when Christine asks our 3-year-old daughter to apologize, she signs the German sign for "sorry," rather than

use A.S.L. It's like she's saying, "I'll apologize ... but not your way." And so that has become a part of our family vocabulary. When we screw up, we'll sign the German sign for "sorry," which to us is an inside joke — meaning a half-assed apology.

**Lucas Odahara:** Sign language is so much about body language and expression: You can be loud in your gesture and presence. Signing in general is so different in other parts of the world, and my work often looks at histories of colonization and language. So it interests me that sign language didn't always follow the same routes as spoken language, which is often connected to violence — it didn't travel with colonization — so people in America sign differently than they do in Britain, or people in Brazil differently than in Portugal

Sometimes, I think Christine thinks I sign better than I do. When I speak to other Deaf people, I understand much less — I've come to realize that might be because I'm signing Christine's language. That is, that one invents signs together, with your community or your close friends. I have signs that I use with Christine, Ace and Chris, but not with anyone else. It feels like a dialect sometimes.

**Ace Mahbaz:** I've learned a lot from Christine about how to interact with hearing people. She reinforced that speaking wasn't necessary for interactions. I can just be who I am, and not apologize for that. Christine is proactive. She doesn't mind interrupting; she doesn't feel like she has to wait for a good moment. What I've learned from Christine is to say, "I am Deaf. I am here. Here are my needs, and you can meet me halfway in that process."



"Friends Who Share a Language" The New York Times, April 12, 2021,  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/12/t-magazine/sign-language-friends.html>