

How I became an artist: Christine Sun Kim

By Emily McDermott, 2022

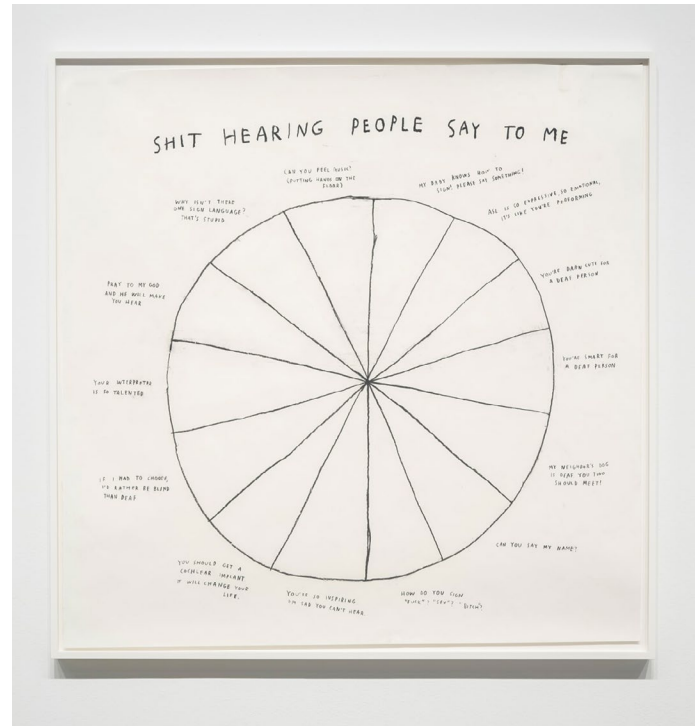


'When I was in high school, I really wanted to take a sculpture class, but there was no interpreter available, so I had to take a crafts class instead. At the Rochester Institute of Technology [where I graduated from in 2002], there are more than 1,000 Deaf students, so there are tons of interpreters but it's hard to schedule one unless it's a popular class. So, early on, I didn't get a lot of the formal training I desired. I just took a bunch of random classes that became essentially a BS degree, and then I went straight to New York.

'One day, I went to ATM Gallery in the East Village and chatted with Bill Brady, the owner. He eventually helped me get into the School of Visual Arts by writing a letter of recommendation for me. I was excited about getting in, but looking back I wasn't ready. I didn't know how to truly interact with hearing people. I didn't understand how to fully conceptualize ideas. It was all very muddy. I thought if I got into art school that I'd become an artist, but nothing happened [after I graduated]. So I started working part-time at W.W. Norton as a digital archivist and at the Whitney as an educator. At the same time, I applied for and got some small grants and residencies, and one of them was in Berlin. I started to understand things better while I was there, like the fact that I needed the right support. When I was there, I also came across the MFA program for sound art at Bard College [in New York state] and that was very interesting to me. When I told my Deaf ex-boyfriend that I wanted to work in sound, he was like, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard." But it didn't make me feel bad at all. It was like, "If you're reacting so strongly to this, it means it's the right path for me to take."

'So I started working with low-frequency sounds and the physicality of it, and that got me into Bard. There, I learned that it isn't easy to integrate [into the hearing world] – as the only Deaf student [working] with hearing faculty members, it was so intense and sometimes extreme. Some teachers, and even other students, implied that they hadn't signed up to try to accommodate me in their communication. And being in upstate New York I couldn't just leave and go hang out with my Deaf friends. It really broke me. But I got a thick skin from it and I became a lot more comfortable being around hearing people for extended periods of time.

'After I graduated from Bard everything changed. I was immediately invited to show at MoMA as part of its first sound exhibition, "Soundings", in 2013, and I also received a TED fellowship. In that MoMA show I had four pieces – a "p tree" [Pianoiss ... issmo (Worse Finish)], All. Day., All. Night., and Feedback Aftermath [all 2012] – and



Christine Sun Kim, *Shit Hearing People Say To Me*, 2019.

to this day I think it's my best work. With those pieces I moved toward notation and conceptual ideas. ASL [American Sign Language] became poetic and musical. One of my interpreters, the sociologist Laura Mauldin, had explained to me that ASL gloss is a rough writing system to notate ASL, and ASL gloss is akin to music notes. To me, the parallel was clear and I wanted to connect the power and strength of musical notation and its centuries of history with ASL gloss.

'With the use of notation, and also with more recent works that use pie charts, I want to make myself as clear as possible in my art. I can't afford to be misunderstood. In an infographic, you don't have to use language to communicate an idea, and I think this is similar to body language and universal happy and sad gestures. Both of these connect to my everyday life and how I navigate communication with people who don't use ASL. When you're getting and giving information secondhand your entire life – through interpreters, through writing, through other mediums – it can

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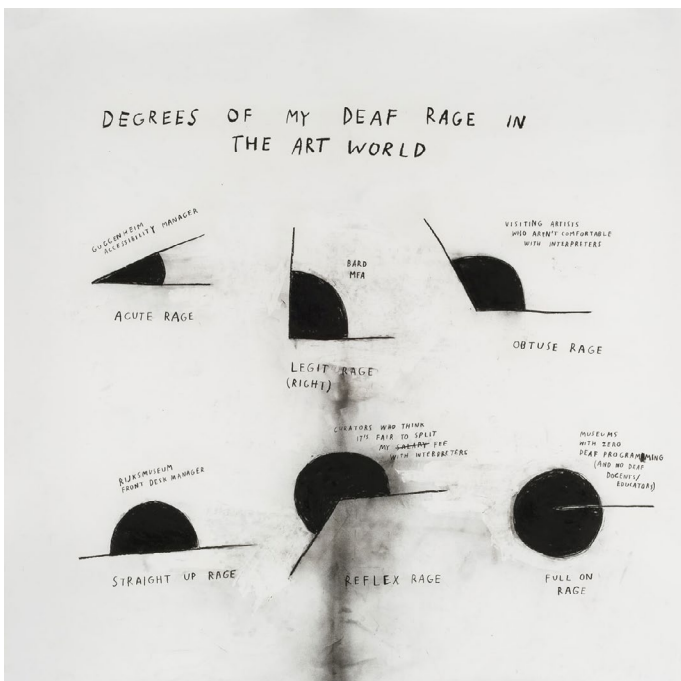
be messy, and sometimes harmful, and I'm always afraid of being misunderstood. My gallery in Los Angeles even wrote an access rider with me to help protect my work and the words used to describe it. Systems help clean things up.

'Drawing has been a really good way to experiment with the musical notation system, and I want to keep pushing that. But generally, when I have a particular idea, I always try to think about which medium might best represent it. I've used technology for immersive experiences or to give people a new listening skill, and video is about capturing the spatiality of sign language. I've also done large public artworks, like murals. These started when the Whitney asked me to do one [in 2018] and then continued with billboards for the collective For Freedoms. I started thinking about public art, what people see every day, and the idea of imposing our Deaf way of being onto hearing people's everyday lives. I feel a little like I'm functioning as an archivist, just like my old job. I'm forcing our place into the histories of art and humanity by creating work. The more I create, the

more we appear in history and the more the Deaf voice is represented.

'Another important moment was when I was invited to perform at the [2020] Super Bowl. Artists are all about platforms and platforming others, right? How to use them, how to disseminate your story, ideas, and concepts. With the Super Bowl I saw that Deaf people were starting to get recognition but then disappeared into the ether soon afterward. So I thought, "Yes, it's clever to see a Deaf signer on national television, but how do we stretch the use of the Super Bowl platform?" Fortunately, around the same time, The New York Times had invited me to write an op-ed about anything. I said I wanted to write about the Super Bowl experience. I was very specific about the performance. I worked my ass off on the translation of the songs – every year, the way the songs are interpreted are different, depending on the performer – and I wore a dress by Humberto Leon and Carol Lim to represent the Asian-American community. When the op-ed was published, people's reactions were incredible. This was the moment when I felt I was no longer separating myself as a Deaf individual from myself as an artist. I felt the integration of the two.

'Being included in the 2019 Whitney Biennial with my "Deaf Rage" series was another pivotal moment, and becoming a mom has also had a big influence on my work. I've had to think about sound not only for myself but also for my family. I've made a lot of art about the "sound diet" and what a sound diet means for my kid. Now I'm working on a huge mural at the Queens Museum [in New York] that will open in March. Even though I've been a full-time artist for more than 10 years, it's still a hustle. Like, how do I get this? How do I achieve that? I feel that I'm a player in a game as an artist, and I enjoy the game.'



Christine Sun Kim, *Degrees of my Deaf Rage in the Art World*, 2018.

<https://artbase1.com/stories/how-i-became-an-artist-christine-sun-kim>