

SF WEEKLY

Q&A with Christine Sun Kim: Connecting the Hearing to the Non-Hearing Through Art

by Amy Fusselman

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Christine Sun Kim is a 33-year-old, New York-based visual, sound, and performance artist who uses sound as a medium in her work. She will be in San Francisco for a month-long residency at Southern Exposure in January.

This writer was able to take a workshop with Kim recently at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where she directed participants in creating, "A Choir of Glances." In this workshop, (during which participants wore earplugs and were not allowed to speak), participants translated words into facial expressions and sounds, ending with a live performance: Kim faced her choir and directed them in a choreography of improvised sounds and facial expressions. It felt like a joyful work.

Kim, who is deaf, answered this Q&A by email, sharing insight into her process and her thoughts about sound and voice.

You have stated that using your own voice is difficult/complicated. Can you elaborate?

I think it has mostly to do with the definition of voice; it depends on which context you place it in. I often mean a few different things every time I say "voice." It could be my voice box (literally); my voice as my platform or tool to express my opinions and comments; or my voice as art, conceptually. In American Sign Language, the "voice" word is signed with a letter V that "draws" your throat as you slide V up. There needs to be a few new signs (and English words) to fit all definitions of "voice."

As a performer, I put a huge emphasis on establishing a direct connection with people without involving a sign language interpreter or any intermediary. My voice is often filtered and sometimes re-contextualized through someone else's voice, which is something I want to avoid. Since I choose not to speak with voice, the only way to communicate with non-signers is through body language and text.

I am very aware of the effects of communicating non-verbally. It either scares people away or makes people feel intimately connected. During performances and workshops with groups of people, I often see how much power I am given to direct them, which I enjoy because I often don't get that in real life.

Your work is concerned with exposing and tearing down the structures of sound behavior in society. How would you characterize what is driving this exploration?

I was pretty much in a bubble—until recently. I was always surrounded by people who knew sign language and I was never entirely comfortable with written English as a tool to interact with non-signers. But the more I made art, the more I wanted dialogue to be involved. I knew I had to work harder on acquiring English because it was the only way to interact with non-signers. After becoming comfortable conveying my thoughts in English, I started to interact more and found myself conscious in a different way around sound norms, and how they affect my communication.

Vocal languages are clearly much more dominant than visual languages in society and I found myself in multiple situations where I would need to use a bit of my non-speech voice to get their attention or be heard. The act of

communicating without sound (in other words, silence), often makes people either uncomfortable or feel the need to hear an uttered word. Now that I feel less shy (or maybe less scared) being around non-signers, I am very curious about how much I can accomplish without a sign language interpreter, and what things/ideas that emerge after each experiment. I guess curiosity drives my practice.



Dan Mahon, courtesy of the Drifter Project

What are you most interested in accomplishing with your practice, as far as the audience is concerned?

I am starting to like the idea of using people's voice as my voice, maybe because that reminds me of the reverse process of my work relationship with interpreters? I direct them in a way that often involves tuning out linguistic machinery (removing grammar, phonology, and context) and adding a focus on sonic materiality of uttered sounds. I want to try to find a way to get in touch with both internal and external presences; I have found that listening to your own voice inside your head automatically makes you stay connected with internal presence, but leaves less attention for external presence, which is what I am mostly connected with. Hmm, maybe the whole thing is about finding the balance in presence? Like "voice," "presence" is also a loaded word. It could mean voice, self existentialism, identity, and simply being present.

What artists -- visual, sound, performance, otherwise -- do you find most inspiring lately?

Music videos, actually. I'm not into lyrics, but I always enjoy their aesthetics and timely tempos and timbres.

I create my own poetic sounds through eyes and imagination. There are a ton of music videos in ASL online but they're usually literal translation of original lyrics, which I find quite linear. Despite the fact that there can be perfect ASL translation for songs, I truly think that ASL isn't fully suitable for music video format. Maybe there could be a few signs, but the rest should be conveyed by non-speech signs and other visual aspects (light, head movement, etc). I guess I've always wanted to make a music video myself. Maybe one day!

Tell us about your upcoming residency.

I'm excited about my residency in January at Southern Exposure, a great organization in San Francisco. It will be loosely based on a few concepts and one is about how people often mistake wind as a sound; it's really an air movement and if you recorded it correctly, you could hear its high pitch at high volume. People often associate it

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with rattling windows and swaying trees and say "it's windy outside." It's actually undetectable to human ears and in a way, that enables me to view both of our relationships to wind exactly the same.

Where in CA are you from? Do you have siblings? What does your family think of your work?

I'm from Orange County. I have one older sister. When I first started using sound in my art, my mom said, "please draw me houses and flowers." It took everyone in my family a while to get what my practice is about. The interviews I did (and some reviews on my group exhibitions and performances) have been so helpful as a few of them were in Korean, so I was able to share those with my parents, relatives, and especially grandparents. I think they're still confused with how I'll be able to monetize my art, as I left my day job six months ago to go full time. I guess I'll find out in a few years.

Finally, what's your fave piece of technology?

The iPhone! After I got my first one three years ago, it completely revolutionized the way I normally interact with non-signers. All those apps such as text-to-BIGWORDS and audio-to-text have helped me in many social settings (dark bars) and long car drives. Even though it has lessened the communication gap, it also removes opportunities for them to learn sign language. I'm trying to find the balance in that, too.