

# BOMB

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## ASL IRL: Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader Interviewed by Isabel Parkes

*On speaking visually.*



Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader, *Classified Digits*, 2016, color digital video with sound, five minutes, twenty-eight seconds. Courtesy of the artists.

Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader have had a busy few years. Between a baby and at least one biennial, the respective sound and conceptual artist rely more than ever on their abilities to juggle roles as well as to develop, through their collaborative and distinct practices, languages that enable them to communicate to ever-splintering audiences. We discussed decisions made creatively versus those made to survive; why being a mother might be harder than being a father; and finding new ways to be heard, some of which are funnier than others.

—Isabel Parkes

### **Isabel Parkes**

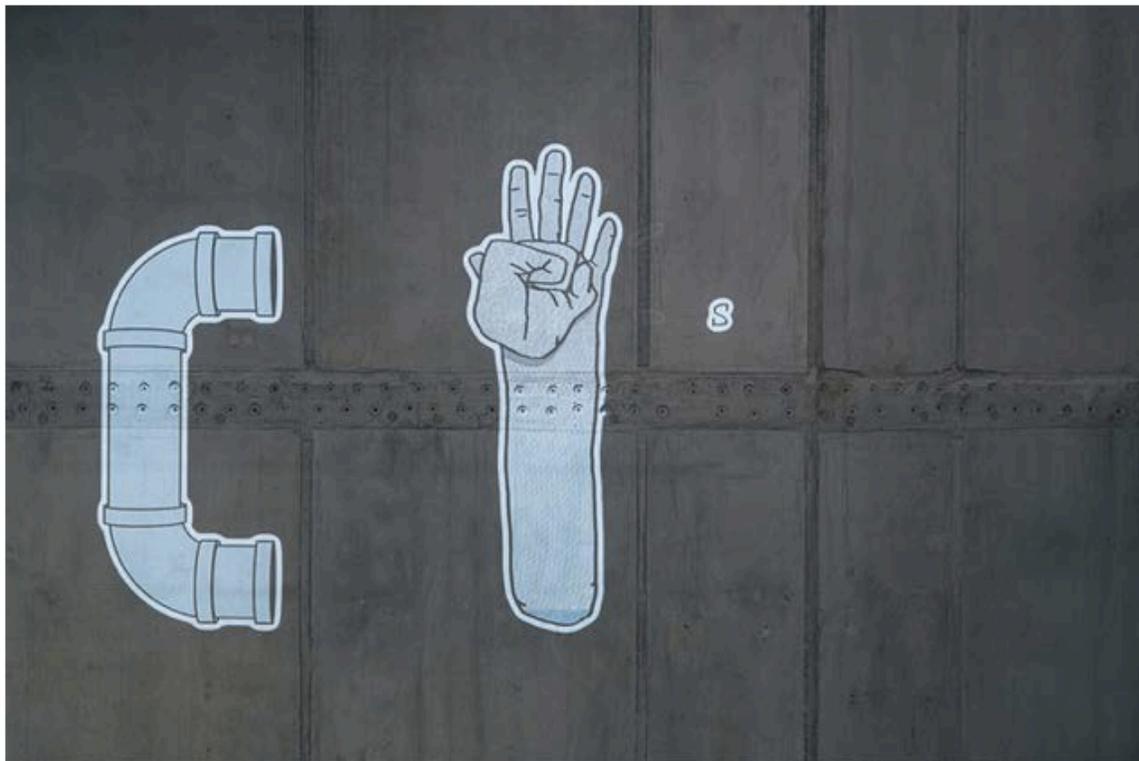
The animation currently on view as part of *Readings from Below* at Times Art Center in Berlin depicts a group of American Sign Language (ASL) gestures that connote various forms of authority as it moves through signs for words including state, law, and constitution. What was your particular starting point for this work about forms of power

### **Christine Sun Kim**

Particularly since Trump was first elected, I think frequently about my citizenship, roots, and family, which is full of immigrants. The hand here uses an image from my actual US passport, and the specific signs we use are called “initialized signs.” An initialized sign is executed by “stamping” different letters from the American Sign Language (ASL) alphabet on an open palm in an up-down motion. Animating a specific gesture while reflecting on my own relationship to being allowed in and out of countries felt like a good way to give form to different loops of decision making.

### **Thomas Mader**

After CK returned from a trip to the US in February and lockdown started, we were informed that the show might only take place online, so animation was also a practical choice. Although as a German passport holder, I’m a pretty privileged traveler, I still have a hard time with US border patrol because of a trip I once took to Iran. I usually ask the guards if they think the next administration might remove Iranian travelers from the persona non grata list. On good days, I get both a laugh and a stamp.



Installation view of Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader, *Palm Reader*, 2020, at *Readings from Below* at the Times Art Center Berlin, color digital video with sound, fifty-four seconds. Photograph by GR.Berlins. Courtesy of the artists. © Times Art Center Berlin 2020.

**IP**

Can you tell me about how you collaborate?

**TM**

When we first met, we didn't live in the same country, so collaborating on work was always a way for us to bridge various gaps. In 2013 we made *Recording Contract* for BOMB as a fairly literal representation of these conditions.

**CK**

Neither of us is especially patient, but we find ways to brainstorm in a language that is not our first. Our language situation has become messier in recent years because of our three-year-old daughter who speaks German with Tom, ASL with me, Deutsche Gebärdensprache (German Sign Language) at daycare, and, currently, we're looking for someone to tutor her in English. Because of my fear of not being able to fully participate in family conversations—please look up “dinner table syndrome”; it's sadly a huge issue in the Deaf community—Tom and I set up some social rules and then try to observe them. I did a drawing series called *Sound Diet* (2018) about this concept of fostering a healthy balance between spoken and signed languages.

**IP**

Tom, what influence does being a parent have on your practice? I have an aversion to female artists always being the ones who comment on parenting.

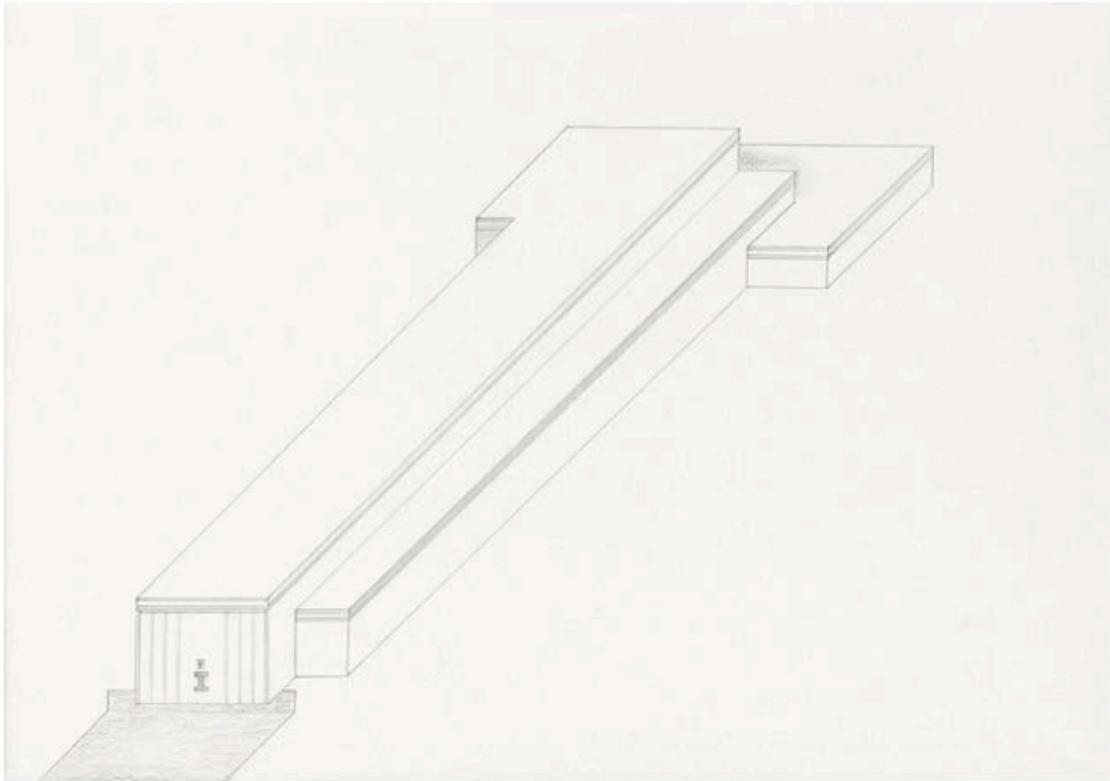
**TM**

When our daughter was still small, we took her to Beijing because CK was working on a solo show there, and I was on parental leave. We went to see the Great Wall, and anyone who has ever been there knows that it's a hike to the top. We took turns carrying the baby, and a few people, mostly tourists, commented on what an amazing father I was, bringing her up there, but no one said anything when CK was doing the same thing. I think this story might illustrate why CK felt that she needed to address being a mother in her work long before I did. Mine is a privileged position in this sense.

Unlike CK, who comes at these issues from a more urgent place, I am only beginning to find ways to incorporate my dad reality in my practice. With the way things are developing both in Europe and the US, I think more and more about how our daughter will experience racism. Since I won't really be able to protect her from it, it feels crucial that we, as artists and as a family, talk about prejudice and how to react to it.

Thoughts of an increasingly violent and splintered world have impacted my recent production, for example a series of drawings that fuse the headquarters of different German secret agencies with the garages rented by National Socialist Underground (NSU) terror cells to make bombs. The *Verfassungsschutz*, the German secret service agency connected to NSU investigations, knew of these garages and either missed opportunities to arrest the core NSU trio that was working in them or intentionally overlooked the spaces in

order to protect their inside sources. Both scenarios are terrifying and shake belief in Germany's constitutional state. Perhaps more positively, this broader, growing awareness also helps me better appreciate local activist groups, for example the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, here in Berlin.



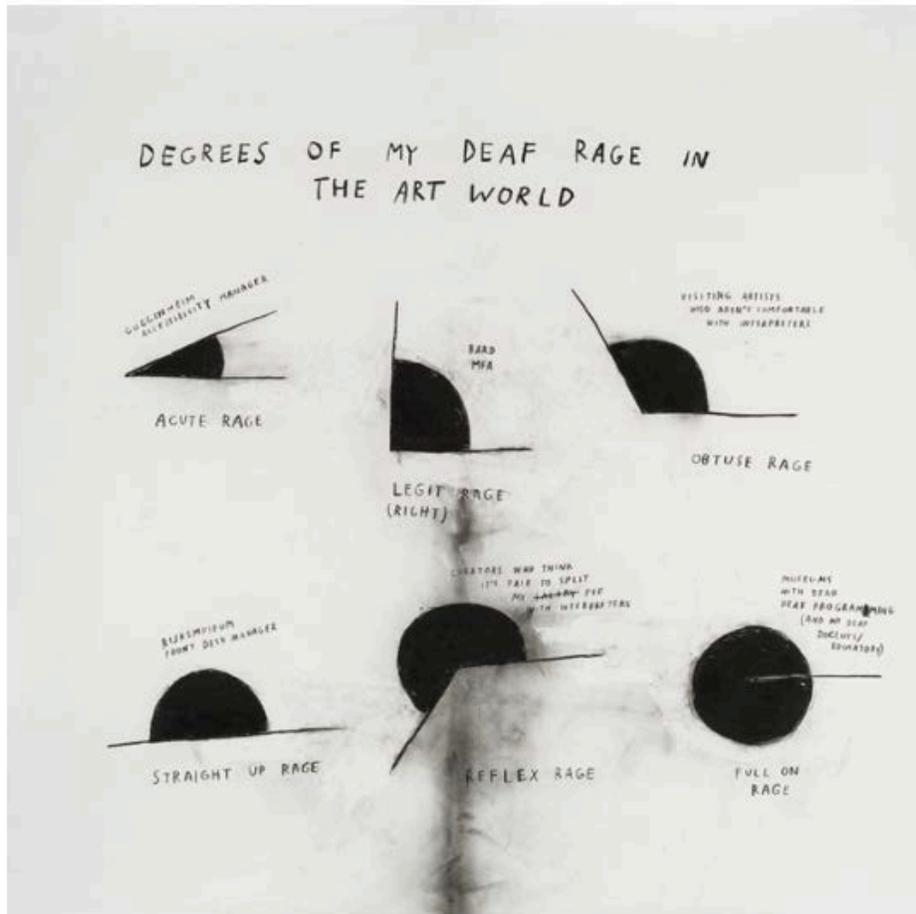
Thomas Mader, *Garagenkomplex (Berlin)*, 2020, pencil on paper, 11.75 x 16.50 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

**IP**

CK, your work on paper in particular directly calls out practices or systems of discrimination. Can you say more about the strategy to be explicit?

**CK**

I've always struggled to articulate my deafness in both English and ASL. Historically, there is a huge gap between Deaf and non-Deaf communities. It hurts every time I see our voice getting lost in translation due to any number of factors: English not being our first language, shitty sign language interpreters, internal colonialism, ableism and audism, inferiority complexes, language deprivation, anti-sign language educators, not enough disability laws to protect us; the list goes on. We start battling to exist as soon as we are born, and almost everything I do and make is to survive. Just a few years ago I started to realize that I'm good at finding ways to communicate Deaf ideas via non-Deaf and mass-media formats. Interpreters for myself, musical notes for ASL, pie charts for our Deaf rage, and so on. I am worried about the future of my community, so I became more and more explicit with my rage and exhaustion. Soft approaches often don't work, and I want to make something that stays in the back of people's heads. Humor is a tool I use to engage people faster in person, and I see that it shows up in my practice.



Christine Sun Kim, *Degrees of My Deaf Rage in the Art World*, 2018, charcoal and oil pastel on paper, 49.25 x 49.25 inches. Courtesy of White Space Beijing and Yang Hao 杨灏.

## IP

What strikes me as especially effective is the way you often use humor to address un-funny situations.

## CK

Practically all my life, people have spoken or voiced on my behalf, and I am not talking about professional sign language interpreters but about my parents, husband, friends, colleagues, even strangers. Earlier this year, I presented a performance called *Spoken on My Behalf* in Toronto for which I used three screens to communicate images and text. In the piece, I walk into the spotlight whenever there's a spoken voice and use my face and body language to remind the audience that they are actually witnessing my voice filtered through someone else's, even in mundane moments like ordering a latte, asking for a bill or an ice cream flavor. Isolated captions like "(white woman's voice)" or "(mysterious musical flourish)" accompany this on the third screen, and each voiceover lasts a few seconds. Every time it stops, I step out of the spotlight and pace around until the next voiceover starts. After the performance, I ask my interpreters which moments made the audience laugh or go aww.

I often exaggerate my facial and body language in order to make myself as clear as possible to non-Deaf people. The underlying concept here explores the ways hearing people often label signers on tv or Deaf performers as

“expressive” or “dramatic” whereas in reality those are either performative skills, grammar, or completely necessary to convey the message to different levels of signing skills and education. What seems exaggerated by me personally is a necessity in order to communicate with a non-signing majority. What seems exaggerated to many is not me being cute; it is me doing my best to “be heard.” Also, I am forty; stop calling me cute.

**IP**

Tom, what does humor allow you to do in your own work?

**TM**

I try to be considerate of my audience and not too hermetic in how I address political realities, and I think humor helps me in this regard. I remember first seeing Peter Liechti’s documentary about Swiss artist Roman Signer. While I am a fan of Signer’s work and think it’s hilarious, Signer himself didn’t strike me as particularly funny, which, in hindsight, adds even more to his oeuvre. This contrast helped me better understand how to employ certain strategies, for example humor, in order to invite viewers in, to keep them engaged, and hopefully get them interested in the other layers of the work. I’m constantly developing my humor and trying not to forget that, as Signer says, being funny is work.

*Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Mader’s Palm Reader can be seen in the exhibition Readings from Below at Times Art Center in Berlin until December 12.*