



RISING STARS ([HTTP://WWW.OZY.COM/RISING-STARS](http://www.ozy.com/rising-stars))

THE DEAF ARTIST RECONSTRUCTING SOUND

WRITTEN BY LIBBY COLEMAN ([HTTP://WWW.OZY.COM/OZY-TRIBE/LIBBY-COLEMAN/65580](http://www.ozy.com/ozy-tribe/libby-coleman/65580)) • APR 23 • 2016

WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Because hearing is an art.

At one of her many performances, Korean-American artist Christine Sun Kim had a run-in with an attendee. Kim had created an audio file for her sound art and had stated not to tell her if the sound is distorted as it plays. Accept it — she didn't want to know.

One woman couldn't resist. She tried to tell Kim there was a problem, but Kim wasn't having it. "It's sound that I made. If I allow somebody to tell me that it doesn't sound right at this part, then there's the indication that I need to change it," Kim tells me over Skype, seated next to her interpreter, Beth Staehle. "They're taking control of it, and then it's not my sound." You could call it artistic OCD, but it goes deeper than that, to a struggle over who owns the experience of sound.

Profoundly deaf since birth, Kim doesn't have your typical perspective on this. Her thesis? Sound isn't as simple as you might think. "Sound is like money, power, control, social currency," she says in her most recent TED Talk (Kim is a

TED Fellow). Sometimes Kim collaborates with other artists and musicians (<http://www.ozy.com/rising-stars/is-this-millennial-composer-the-next-mozart/65558>), “leasing” their voices, she says. Other pieces are experiences composed of people with sound-canceling headphones interacting with one another, or of people reacting to sound. By witnessing their reactions, she too can experience the noise — albeit secondhand.

These are concepts in the deaf community that are just not documented.

Christine Sun Kim

In other work, Kim draws a mixture of musical notation, American Sign Language motions and cues. In doing so, she’s translating sound into something visual, exploring it as a concept from every angle. Like in her piece *All. Day.* — she drew a rest symbol with the number 126,144,000, or the number of rest bars that had spanned her then 32 years of life in silence.

Kim does have a voice, though: a humorous, thoughtful, creative, edgy (yes, she throws down a lot of curses during our Skype session) voice. According to artistic collaborator Jeffrey Mansfield, it’s not deafness that makes Kim special: “It’s her total disregard for fear that makes her so provocative and righteous.” Plus, he says, it’s the concepts behind her work that stand out. There are “unique, irreproducible ways of conveying ideas in sign language,” he says — and Kim makes full use of her knowledge of those visual symbols.

FEATURED STORY

([/acumen/why-overdelivering-is-overrated/32924](http://acumen/why-overdelivering-is-overrated/32924))

WHY OVERDELIVERING IS OVERRATED ([/ACUMEN/WHY-OVERDELIVERING-IS-OVERRATED/32924](http://ACUMEN/WHY-OVERDELIVERING-IS-OVERRATED/32924))

She’s not alone in this endeavor. It’s been a big year in deaf (<http://www.ozy.com/good-sht/dining-in-a-deaf-restaurant/40059>) culture. For starters, it was recently the 25th anniversary of the Americans With Disabilities

Act, which shed light on current discrimination against the deaf. And Nyle DiMarco, a face for deaf advocacy who won *America's Next Top Model* and performs on *Dancing With the Stars*, has increased his dedication to his philanthropic efforts toward improving ASL education. Similarly melding art and deafness, Broadway staged a deaf and hearing production of *Spring Awakening*, with sign language and singing. Then there's Kim, who is opening a group show in Milan and will create performance art pieces that refer to two children's books in the fall.

When Kim was young, she knew she wanted to be an artist (<http://www.ozy.com/rising-stars/the-artist-who-pays-other-people-to-make-his-art/66315>). At Sunday church, she found herself drawing pictures; she liked art better than writing, and had an early knack for images. But she figured she'd need a more lucrative, or at least stable, job. It wasn't always easy; she moved to New York and found it hard to hold down work. Then she found stability as an archivist for a publisher. Her boss at the publishing house let her use parts of her summer to study at Bard, where she earned a graduate degree in art.

Today, she's more of an archivist of deaf culture for discussions on tough issues — like how to have a place in society without hearing or needing to hear through ears, what sounds are polite and impolite, what silence means to the deaf and who owns sound. So she laughs when people say she's the first deaf sound artist. "It's like, I'm not much of a pioneer," she says. "These are concepts in the deaf community that are just not documented."

As a translator of deaf experience, there's a lot of work to do in our "audio-centric world," as she says in her TED Talk. At the end of the talk, she teaches three phrases in sign language, one of which is the sign for falling in love. "ASL is such a rich treasure that I'd like you to have the same experience," she says. "And you never know, you might just fall in love with us."