

Navigating Laws and Accessibility in Exhibition Practices

BY CHRISTINE SUN KIM

I am always mindful of how I identify and present myself in the art world—at the same time, I’m aware of how much certain laws, rules and expectations have shaped me. Given the fact that there are a variety of hierarchies in identities and languages, I usually navigate my multiple identities according to which platform I am presenting myself on, and how I’d like to communicate my art and personhood.

I recall a situation from a few years ago, when I worked as an educator at an art museum. They had asked me to conduct a video interview with an established older artist who happens to be deaf like me. He quickly (and understandably) declined the request because he found being interviewed by an American Sign Language (ASL) user to be a potential “distraction from his practice.” That incident led me to think about how privileges and disabilities correlate with each other. He is a white, male artist with speech skills, so perhaps his privilege allows him to build his own persona for his audiences. As a Korean-American female artist that primarily communicates in ASL, I’m much less privileged to tell people to fuck off.

Weirdly, there have been times where people have told me they’re not ableist or audist and that they see me just like anyone else. This has, more often than not, led to those same people ignoring my deafness when it would have been necessary for them to be mindful of it.

However, things are slowly changing. Disability studies emerged in the 1980s and have continued to thrive in a few countries. I consider myself culturally Deaf (since we are a linguistic minority, this identity has shaped up to something somewhat similar to an ethnic identity) rather than deaf (in a medical sense, as far as hearing loss is concerned). As an adult, I have come to understand that a large part of my identity and career is a product of the Americans with Disabilities Act that was enacted in 1990. (Quick fact: it was modeled after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits



discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin.) Under this legislation, I was able to study and obtain college degrees with the aid of certified sign language interpreters (funded by institutional accessibility budgets), could watch as many television series and movies with captions as I liked, and was able to make phone calls with help from online interpreters. I have exhibited, performed and lectured worldwide.

I have noticed that the more laws there are that protect people with disabilities, the greater flexibility or freedom I enjoy in terms of my own identity. In places with zero or few laws supporting people with disability, I spend most of my time hustling, asking the same questions over and over again and explaining why some of the accommodations that have to be made prior to and during my engagement are necessary not just for myself, but for everyone involved. Naturally, the energy spent on these negotiations compromises the effort that could have instead been spent on my artwork.

Two factors have contributed to my ability to fully express myself: the internet, which enables me to communicate with people who offer exhibition opportunities via email; and sign language interpreters, who work with me in school, conference and museum settings. Not every institution is generous and willing to find ways to

compensate things beyond minimum needs, but there are a few good apples. A number of museums in the United States have a budget for accessibility, but the amount of red tape involved makes it very difficult to access these funds. In the past, curators and directors often had to resort to using their exhibition budget to cover my specific accommodation requirements. In these situations, there often is discomfort and tension, which really could have been easily prevented.

In 2015, I held a performance-talk titled “Five Finger Discount History” at the Berlin Biennale, where I offered a critique of Deaf history and retold it with my personal observations added. Sure, my identities overlap—I’m a woman, Asian, American, a mother—but my Deaf identity often comes first and foremost, because of the way I communicate, which constantly shapes my place in a society full of spoken languages. I find it intriguing that my identity is often represented by my interpreters’ voices, which acts as an extension to my identity.

Diversity isn’t my favorite word, but I hope that one day, societies and systems will become flexible enough to suit everyone and anyone. There needs to be a better trust system between artists and organizers, who should be fiercely protective of each cultural practitioner’s time and work. I believe that everyone is responsible for creating or respecting spaces for minorities.

It took me years to feel comfortable enough (and perhaps, with the privileges I have developed as an artist ever since) to be open about my Deaf experience. Because of the increasing abundance of identity labels, people are more or less open about their intersectional identities today. This has impacted my practice and dialogue, and as a result, I no longer include “deaf since birth” in my biography.

ILLUSTRATION BY LOK WONG

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