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# Meet Christine Sun Kim — The Sound Artist Who's Changing The Way We Listen

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BY: DAVID PEMBERTON ([HTTP://UPROXX.COM/AUTHOR/DAVID-PEMBERTON/](http://uproxx.com/author/david-pemberton/)) 04.26.16 • 4 COMMENTS ([HTTP://UPROXX.COM/LIFE/MEET-CHRISTINE-SUN-KIM-THE-SOUND-ARTIST-WHOS-CHANGING-THE-WAY-WE-LISTEN/#COMMENTS](http://uproxx.com/life/meet-christine-sun-kim-the-sound-artist-whos-changing-the-way-we-listen/#comments))

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“p is my favorite musical symbol,” Christine Sun Kim explained during a recent TedTalk

([https://www.ted.com/talks/christine\\_sun\\_kim\\_the\\_enchanting\\_music\\_of\\_sign\\_language?language=en#t-369816](https://www.ted.com/talks/christine_sun_kim_the_enchanting_music_of_sign_language?language=en#t-369816)). “It means to play softly. If you’re playing a musical instrument and you notice a p in the score, you need to play softer. Two p’s, even softer. Four p’s, extremely soft...but no matter how many thousands upon thousands of p’s there may be, you’ll never completely achieve silence. That’s my current definition of silence. It’s a very obscure sound.”

Kim sounds like a musician when she talks about her work, but calling her that doesn’t tell the whole story. She’s an interactive designer. public speaker.

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and experimental sound artist. She's best known for the creative and exploratory ways in which she manipulates sound.

Which is pretty damn impressive, considering that she's never heard any of it. Because Christine Sun Kim is deaf.

"I watch how people behave and respond to sound," she says. "At the same time, I've learned that I create sound...thus I've learned from example. Don't slam the door, don't make too much noise when you're eating from the potato chip bag, don't burp...all of these things I term 'sound etiquette.' Maybe I think about sound etiquette more than the average hearing person does. I'm hyper-vigilant around sound. I'm always waiting in eager nervous anticipation around sound, about what's to come next."



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In "Game of Skill 2.0 (<https://vimeo.com/142659892>)"—one of Kim's most recent art installations—the audience is invited to listen to a recording of a museum intern reading a passage that Kim wrote. The recording can only be heard, however, when a small handheld device is escorted beneath the path of large cables suspended high above. The recording plays in pace with the holder's walking speed, even playing in reverse if the holder begins walking backward.

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The experience transforms listening into a kind of physical labor, forcing the audience to walk at just the right speed and in just the right way to understand the recording. In other words, sound becomes less about hearing and more about movement. It becomes tactile, interactive, physical — like someone speaking with their hands instead of their mouth. “In the end,” Kim says, “it’s my voice.”

It is, in a way, reminiscent of Wassily Kandinsky ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wassily\\_Kandinsky](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wassily_Kandinsky)). He is believed to have had a condition called synesthesia which gave him the ability to “see” sounds. Where Kandinsky used his gift to give sound a visual representation in abstract and surrealist paintings, Kim uses her situation to give sound a visceral, physical transformation. She offers her audience the experience of synesthesia by reverse engineering deafness and by linking the sensations of touch and hearing.

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"I realized sound is like money, power, control, social currency," explains Kim. "In the back of my mind, I always felt that sound was your thing — a hearing person thing — and [I realized that] sound is so powerful that it could either disempower me and my artwork or it could empower me. I chose to be empowered."

When an audience interacts with Kim's work — either in an installation or drawing or musical score — they are invited to experience sound in a new way and, often, with new senses, using "more of their brain" to hear. It's exactly what Kim has done her entire life: experiencing sound through secondary and even tertiary means. It's doing exactly what good art should: using the relationship between the audience and the work to create a new understanding of the world.

"Sound overlaps social reactions. I understand sound through people's reactions. If I'm in a restaurant and I see people shift their gaze towards something, it indicates that a sound took place," explains Kim. "People are my speakers. I can tell something is going on from their behaviors."

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Kim is exploring sound on a fundamental level. She is trying to figure out what it means to experience sound, especially beyond the effects of auditory perception. Growing up, Kim "saw people react to sound," but felt that she "never had a chance to explore [it]." As her creative efforts expand, so does her understanding of how we all interact with noise.

"When I ask questions it leads to more questions," Kim says. "I think about sound and then I think about what silence is." Maybe silence isn't as simple as we've always thought. Maybe there is no such thing as silence, not really. Kim's entire life has been filled with cacophonous, overwhelming sound — the only difference is that she has experienced it in ways that we're unable to fully understand.

But that's what Christine Sun Kim is trying to do, she's trying to make us understand what silence really is, to her. For those of us who can hear, silence is the lack of noise. There's no other way for us to perceive it because we've never been forced to taste it, or touch it, or see it. Her work bridges the gap between our senses, giving us a clear definition of silence. It's nothing more than a very obscure sound.

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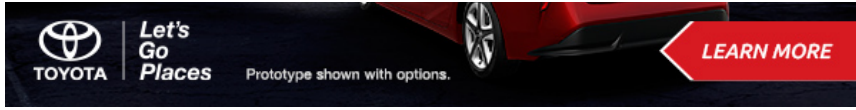
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