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INTERVIEWS OCT. 06, 2016

## The Politics of Sound: An Interview with Christine Sun Kim

by Philomena Epps



The enchanting music of sign language, a TED talk by Christine Sun Kim, 2015. Photo Ryan Lash.



This week, as part of Frieze Live 2016, the events program for the London art fair, California—born, Berlin—based artist Christine Sun Kim is presenting a new performance piece, *Nap Disturbance*. Born deaf, Kim explores the materiality of sound through drawing, painting, and video, opening up new fields of perception to hearing and hearing impaired audiences alike. Much of her practice has been developed around what she refers to as “hearing etiquette”—certain behaviors she finds herself adopting to remain within the bounds of accepted social interactions in an auditory world. While she cannot hear them herself, the artist has developed a heightened awareness of the sounds her actions produce. She thinks of the gestures and reactions of the people around her as an “echo chamber.” I corresponded with Kim over e-mail in the run-up to the fair.

**PHILOMENA EPPS** I want to start by talking about “hearing etiquette.” In your 2015 TED talk, you refer to certain behaviors that you’ve learned: “don’t slam the door,” “don’t make too much noise when eating from the potato chip bag,” “don’t burp,” and so on. Can you talk about how your Frieze performance grew out of the experience of trying to keep quiet while your partner—who works night shifts—sleeps during the day? How does this relate to the performance itself?

**CHRISTINE SUN KIM** When someone takes a nap near me, I feel as if the volume goes up—my quiet noises become really loud. I’ve been thinking a lot about how sound occupies the space around me; sometimes I feel careless or suffocated or self-conscious when I’m with people. I don’t get feedback from my own noises, only from

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others, which is why I often call people “speakers,” as in the equipment. I’ve adapted this concept of the varied experience of sound in different contexts and at different calibration points loosely from a book I read when I was young, *Too Much Noise* by Ann McGovern. It’s about a farmer who complains about subtle noises in his house, like the creaking roof. Upon the advice from the village wise man, he adds more and more animals to his household before getting rid of all of them in the end. He then finds the house incredibly quiet, and he sleeps like a baby. You have to experience something in the extreme to find a small amount of it insignificant.

For my performance, I’ve choreographed moves with performers utilising household items that create a range of sounds, from polite to not-so-polite, like sip or loudly gulp water from a glass, tiptoe or drag feet, and softly or loudly fold a chair. I find it interesting how much I have to respect or be conscious of other people’s sonic space, not the other way around.

**EPPS** How does *Nap Disturbance* expand on the development of your practice so far, especially in relation to recent projects like *Close Readings* [2015] or *Game of Skill 2.0* [2015]?

**KIM** It’s hard to tell at this moment but my practice offers different possibilities of listening: listening while napping, listening while watching movies, listening while playing games, listening while walking, and so on. Listening can mean so many things, and can encompass many other sensory experiences.

**EPPS** I am curious about how the shifts from polite to not-so-polite behaviors in the Frieze performance will also be amplified by the undercurrents of what is considered appropriate social etiquette at an art fair.

**KIM** Planning this at first was somewhat challenging for me as the fair asked me not to be too loud as it would disturb vendors and their dealings with buyers. Maybe that’s a comment on how much social value sound has. I hadn’t realized the extent of how loud art fairs can be until I started planning this piece. It seems like every time I plan a sound piece in a certain place, I always end up learning about the sound limits of that place. It’s not like I can walk into a McDonald’s and ask, “how loud can I be?” “Just enough not to disturb the others enjoying their Big Macs.”

**EPPS** I’ve read that your performers are going to be dressed in bright chroma green. Chroma-key is a technique commonly used in film and video to digitally insert backdrops and other images during post-production. Can you talk about the significance of the performance as an intervention in relation to the binary notions of visibility and audibility, disappearance and silence?

**KIM** I love how we're supposed to disappear into the backdrop of the fair, especially in our chroma-key costumes. But at the same time that color will definitely make us stand out, visually disturbing the surroundings. I designed them to look like gym clothes, but the kind you'd wear at home, not for exercise. The hoodie, to me, enables the maximum quietness—in terms of visibility—that we can achieve. Our best attempt to be the quietest or most inconspicuous is when we put the hood on and tighten it.

**EPPS** Do you anticipate any audience participation?

**KIM** I'll use the audience's glances and turned necks as my feedback. If we're doing something that's supposed to be loud and no one is looking at us, I will prompt the performers to be much louder.

**EPPS** What do you hope people will bring away from the performance?

**KIM** I hope they'll learn to relax their sound expectations for others, maybe . . . and to take naps with earplugs.

**EPPS** Your performance activates the Frieze tent as a kind of testing ground for larger philosophical ideas about social interaction, ableism, and privilege. I'm interested in how this potentially complements the **workshop** you have developed for Tate Modern's new Exchange program, which will take place on October 13.

**KIM** My process has always been highly collaborative and I think that influence comes from my long-term relationships with sign language interpreters. Art events can often be exclusive and their social value sometimes seems questionable. At Tate Exchange, I'm asking participants to work collaboratively to brainstorm and develop a short film. As far as issues of ableism and privilege are concerned, I am receiving better support for my communication differences and opportunities to produce work from these kinds of events and programs. The workshop is open to all and is fully accessible to deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing participants.

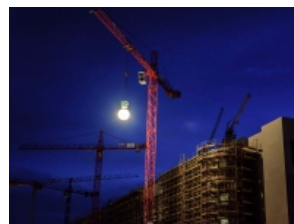
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