

THE SATURDAY PROFILE

# With Sign Language and Sound, an Artist Upends Audience Perceptions

Christine Sun Kim’s poetic and political art pushes viewers to consider the limits, and misunderstandings, that come with communication in any language, whether spoken or signed.

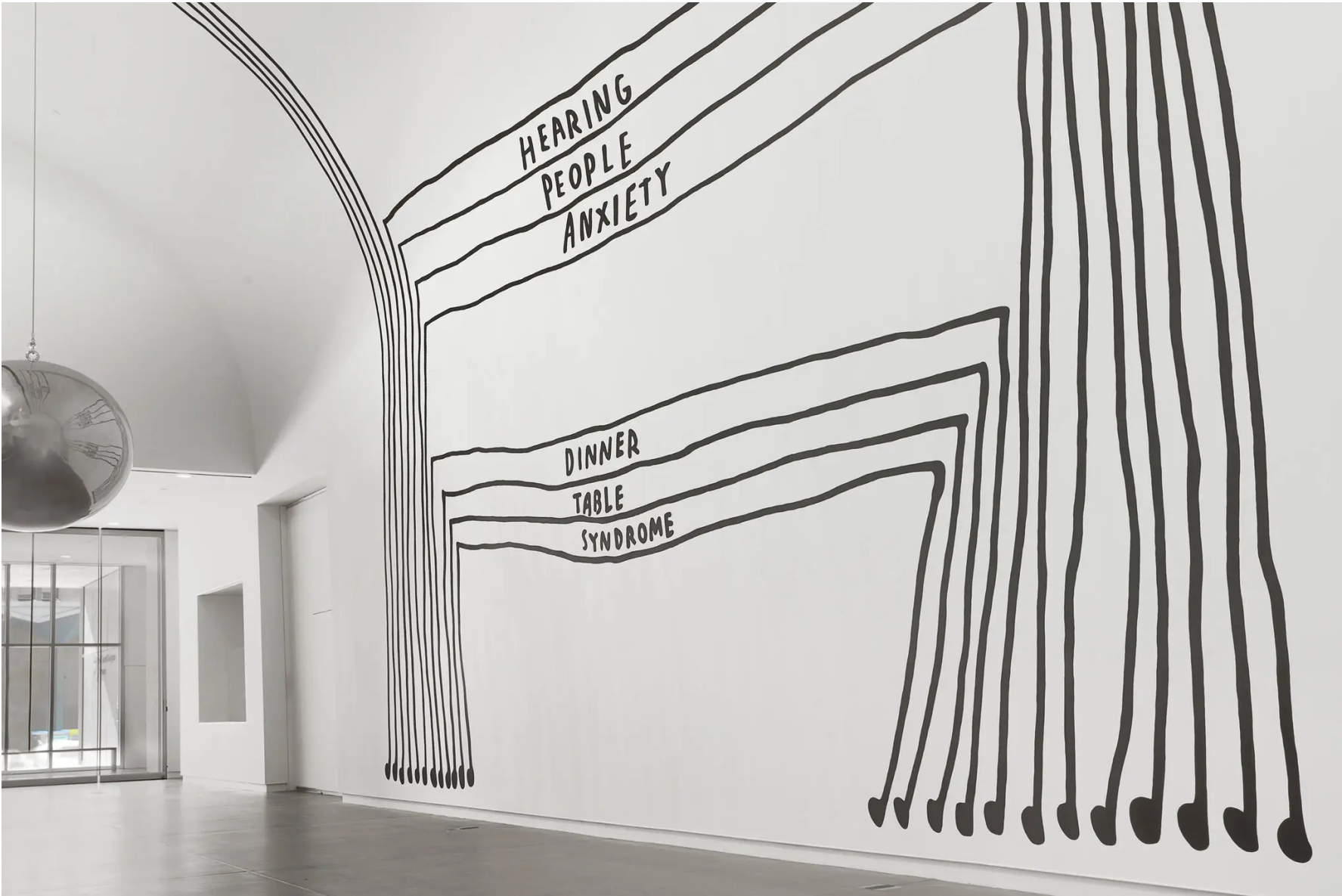
By Andrew Russeth  
July 9, 2022

Last summer, a small plane hauled a sign with an intriguing phrase over Manchester, England: “The Sound of Smiling.”

At the Queens Museum in New York right now, “Time Owes Me Rest Again” is scrawled on a wall, each supersized word accompanied by curving lines swooping across the enormous mural.

And earlier this year, visitors to the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in St. Louis were confronted with an atrium-filling artwork listing sources of personal trauma, including “Dinner Table Syndrome.”

“I’m finally at the point where I can do whatever I want, and I am going for it,” the artist responsible for all of this, Christine Sun Kim, said in American Sign Language from Berlin, her longtime home.



A partial view of Ms. Kim’s “Stacking Traumas” work at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, at Washington University in St. Louis. Alise O’Brien

Ms. Kim, who was born deaf, said that while growing up, and later, as an aspiring artist, she knew she was being denied opportunities afforded the hearing.

That is a common experience, according to Gerard Buckley, president of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and dean of the Rochester Institute of Technology, where Ms. Kim studied as an undergraduate. “Deaf children throughout the world,” Dr. Buckley wrote in an email, “all too often hear negative messages about their career aspirations.”

With Ms. Kim’s work now sought out by collectors and museums around the world, Mr. Buckley said she has become a role model for deaf children — and the artist said she’s now “trying to make up for all those years.”

Over the past decade, working in wry drawings (charts, text and musical notation), video, audio, performance and the odd airplane banner, Ms. Kim, 42, has made work that is poetic and political, charismatic and candid, and that upends the conventions of language and sound.





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At MoMA PS1 in Queens in 2015, Ms. Kim staged an installation that asked visitors to hold a speaker in their hands and walk while trying to keep a protruding antenna in contact with a wire overhead. When done successfully, a voice emerged from the speaker, reading a text. It was a difficult task, a physical embodiment of how tenuous — and rigid — communication can be.

As her reputation has grown and her work has been featured in increasingly high-profile venues, she has become the very rare artist with a public platform that transcends the often insular art world.

At the 2020 Super Bowl, in what she said was an act of both protest and patriotism, Ms. Kim performed the national anthem in American Sign Language, or ASL. But Fox, which was broadcasting the game, showed her for only a few seconds before cutting away, a decision she condemned in a guest essay for The New York Times.

Five years earlier, she delivered a hugely popular TED Talk about ASL, her art and navigating the hearing world. Initially hesitant about the TED invitation — “I was almost a little bit embarrassed about how corporate it was” — the talk, now viewed over two million times, changed her life, she said, bringing global attention to her work.



Ms. Kim performed the national anthem and “America the Beautiful” in American Sign Language at Super Bowl LIV. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times



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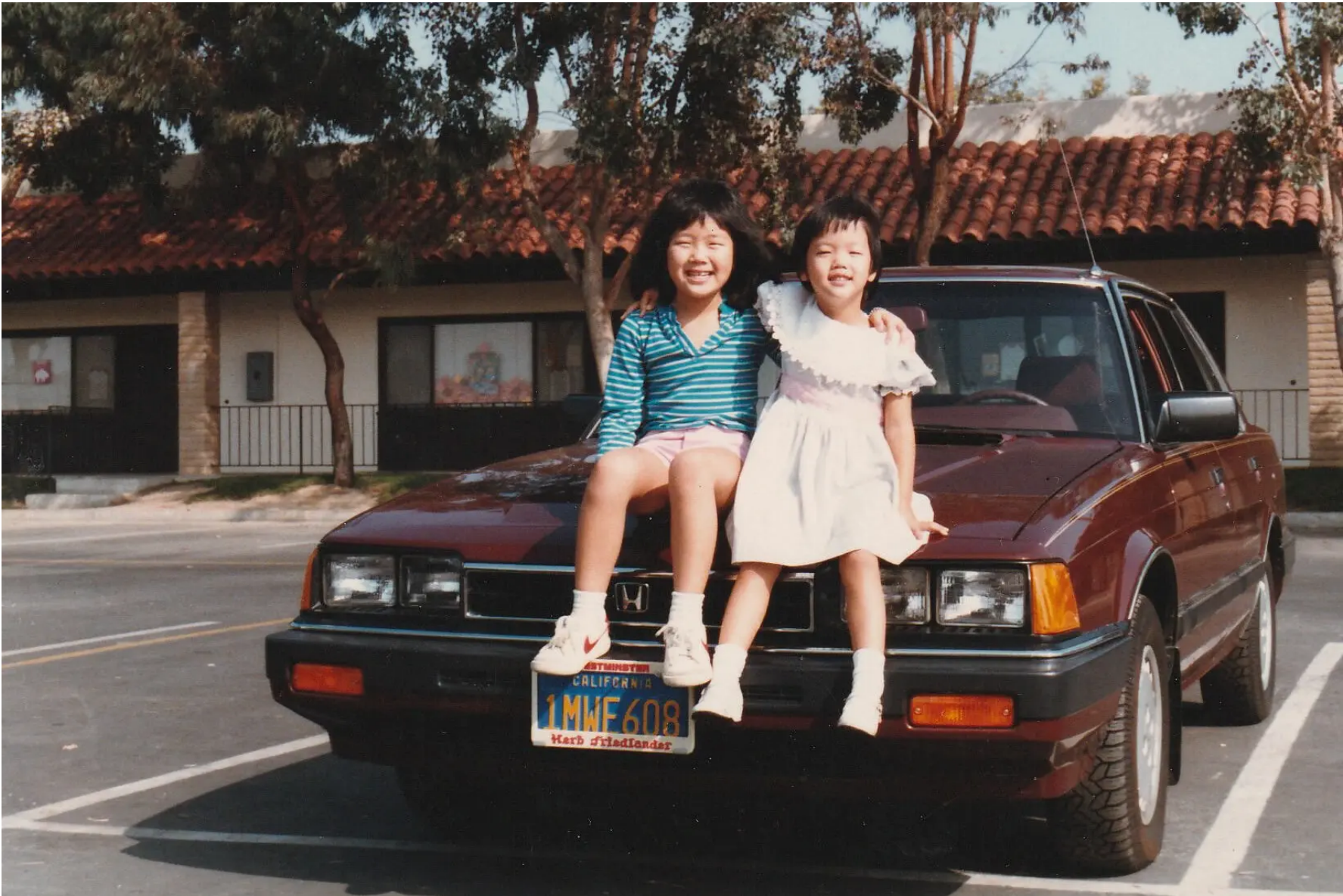
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— *Marc Lacey, Managing Editor*

Post-college, she decamped to New York, and worked as an assistant at the Lexington School for the Deaf and as an educator at the Whitney Museum while trying to figure out her future.

“Deaf people are always teachers by default,” she said, recalling that time. “We have to teach hearing people ASL, Deaf culture, whatever. So I think that inside, I had given up on being an artist, too.”

(Like many of her peers, Ms. Kim capitalizes the word Deaf to connote a shared culture.)



Ms. Kim, right, with her sister Jayne when they were children.





From left, Jayne Kim, the artist's sister; Kay Kim, her mother; Ivan Kim, her father, and the artist at her college graduation in 2002.

Ms. Kim got an M.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts in 2006, but was still feeling listless when she made a transformative trip to the German capital for a residency. Many exhibitions in the city involved sound art, and that got her thinking.

“It took me a while to admit that I wanted to work with sound — maybe a few years, actually — because I was scared,” Ms. Kim said. “I thought that working with sound was something that was so oppressive, and ingrained or dominant in our society.”

But she eventually enrolled in Bard College’s sound program, which encourages experimental approaches to the medium, and earned her second M.F.A. in 2013, before settling in Berlin. On a previous trip there, she had met an artist, Thomas Mader, 38, now her husband and occasional collaborator. He learned ASL and helped teach it to their daughter, Roux, who just turned 5.

Much of Ms. Kim’s art nudges viewers to reconsider how they hear and perceive, and pushes them to think about the limits, and risks and misunderstandings, that come with communication in any language.



“Time Owes Me Rest Again,” a mural by Christine Sun Kim at the Queens Museum. Hai Zhang

At the Queens Museum, the zooming lines in her gargantuan mural suggest comic-book action, but they actually chart the motions required to sign its defiant title, “Time Owes Me Rest Again.”



The piece “foregrounds ASL as a language — and it’s not generally centered in a monumental way in spaces,” said Sally Tallant, the museum’s director.

That enigmatic airplane banner (“The Sound of Smiling”) was from Ms. Kim’s “Captioning the City” project, whose texts, scattered playfully around Manchester, alluded to how closed-captioning can elucidate or obscure meaning, depending on how it renders nonverbal material like music.

Lately, echoes have been appearing in Ms. Kim’s work. “In my very Deaf life, everything is repeated or an echo,” she said. “Beth is basically repeating what I’m saying, and captions are a repetition or an echoing.”



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In the hearing world’s view of deafness, or in the Deaf community itself, Ms. Kim said, there’s always a danger of a single view, an echo, being repeated unthinkingly.

“Echo Trap” was the title of a sprawling mural exploring that danger, which she presented at a 2020–21 exhibition about art and disability at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, or MMK, in Frankfurt, Germany. A black line bounced along the walls, with the words “HAND PALM” atop it, nodding to the gestures for “echo” in ASL. It appeared to be engulfing the room.

Her similarly expansive work seen in St. Louis, “Stacking Traumas,” raised fraught topics like being stuck at dinner with hearing people who cannot sign. (That is “Dinner Table Syndrome.”)

Ms. Kim is part of “a whole generation of mostly young, American and female artists who are political and are activist, and doing some great work — the activism is part of their work,” said Susanne Pfeffer, the MMK’s director.





“Echo Trap” by Ms. Kim, at the Museum für Moderne Kunst, in Frankfurt, Germany. Axel Schneider for Museum fur Moderne Kunst

In the same MMK exhibition, Ms. Kim displayed work from “Deaf Rage,” a series of casual-looking charts that record her exasperation with the art industry and the broader world. One rage-inducing example: “Curators Who Think It’s Fair to Split My Fee With Interpreters.”

As part of her activism, Ms. Kim is the co-founder of an initiative with the designer Ravi Vasavan that promotes the use of a Deaf Power symbol, rendered as <0/.

“Deaf people have worked really hard to protect, to fight, to kind of be an activist — and there isn’t really room to have fun, to play, in our lives,” the artist said. “I feel like we don’t get to play enough because of our identities at times, or because of the way that society is set up.”

Ms. Kim’s mischievous and incisive art, and even her activism, attempts to correct that.

“I just want deafness to not be just about barriers,” she said while discussing <0/. “Deafness can also be about joy. It’s also about community. This is our way of telling people that.”



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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: Exposing the Limits of Language, Whether Spoken or Signed



# International

The New York Times

THE SATURDAY PROFILE CHRISTINE SUN KIM

## Exposing the Limits of Language, Whether Spoken or Signed

By ANDREW RUSSETH

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MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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SCOTT MCINTYRE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



CHRISTINE SUN KIM

Clockwise from above left: Ms. Kim at the 2020 Super Bowl in Miami, where she performed “America the Beautiful” and “The Star-Spangled Banner”; a multiexposure of Ms. Kim in Los Angeles; Ms. Kim, right, at her college graduation in 2002 with her parents and sister.

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AXEL SCHNEIDER FOR MUSEUM FÜR MODERNE KUNST, INSTALLATION BY CHRISTINE SUN KIM, MUSEUM FÜR MODERNE KUNST

Part of a mural Ms. Kim presented at a 2020-21 exhibition at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, Germany, called “Echo Trap.” The bouncing black line was a nod to the gestures for “echo” in American Sign Language.