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PAPER



**ARTIST CHRISTINE SUN KIM TALKS
SOUND ETIQUETTE, BEING ASIAN-
AMERICAN AND NAVIGATING HER
OWN IDENTITY**



"When people think about me, they think about me as a deaf person first and tend to not think about me as an Asian-American or a Korean-American," sound artist Christine Sun Kim signs on Skype via her interpreter. And while the 35-year-old Berlin resident is still trying to figure out how much of each aspect of her identity informs her work, she's mainly been recognized for her attempts to expand the understanding of sound while exploring the concept of "sound etiquette," or the social norms and cues that govern our everyday interactions; whether that be knowing not to slam a door or make too much noise when someone else is asleep. As demonstrated by works like *Game of Skill 1.0*, where participants learn how to physically manipulate a device that pieces together a text written by Kim, all in an attempt to reorient the perception of listening as something that's purely passive -- an idea that's also reflective of her own experiences of having to consciously adapt her own actions to external norms and social cues, whether that be applied to hearing or American culture.

So the main thrust of your work focuses on sound etiquette, could you maybe elaborate more on this concept?

It's almost like the concept of sound etiquette has been built into society right from the beginning -- for hearing people that is. It's not something that hearing people even think about, but there are rules to sound etiquette that you follow. For example, if you are watching a play and you hear people laughing, you're thinking about your laugh in relation to theirs, making sure that your laugh is not too loud, or too low, or that it's a giggle instead of a belly laugh. And there are all these rules that govern laughing that you are probably unaware of but actually contribute and adhere to...and as a deaf person, I rely on you hearing people to relay those rules to me. Based on your reaction, I respond and behave differently. For example, I could be a loud eater—I could slam my fork on the plate unknowingly, or I could slam a door, and those things don't bother me because I don't hear it, but I notice that if I bang my fork on a plate, all of a sudden all the hearing people at the table are looking at me. So I know that I've violated a rule of sound, and because of that I've manipulated my behavior to be more quiet. For example, when I was at school I learned not to tap on the desk and things like that. Another example might be stuff that I've included in my artwork, and I've kind of thought about making these rules of sound etiquette exposed and sometimes the rules of sound etiquette, being how they are, make me feel like I have no place in society because sound is so valuable and so powerful.

What's the first experience you can remember of having this hearing culture all around you and not really knowing how to respond?

I have to say it was when I was pretty young with teachers and interpreters. My parents, by the way, are hearing, but I do have a sister who is deaf. My parents were always telling me, "Be quiet! Be quiet!" and my teacher was always telling me

"Be quiet! Be quiet!", and I remember that the kids had some kind of code. I remember not knowing that code and having to figure out how to fit in with all the hearing kids in my classroom. I guess I had an understanding of it, but not a deep one or an awareness. And I didn't *really* have an awareness of sound until I became a sound artist. And I feel that in the deaf community we often have this conversation, but it's not documented and it's not widely publicized. People say, "Oh, yeah, I know I'm supposed to be quiet when I do this, I know I'm supposed to behave this way," but it's not really put out there in a mainstream sort of way. Being a sound artist is actually a way of documenting this for our community. But this conversation has been happening for years.

How did you get started as a sound artist?

I went to Berlin in 2008, got a residency, and I noticed that there wasn't a lot of retinal art. A lot of the galleries were empty spaces filled with sound, and these sound artists were popping up a lot around Berlin. And that was the first time I got the sense that "sound art" was trending at the time, and more and more artists were using sound as a medium for art. I've always thought of the art world as a safe place, especially for me as a visual artist, because I'm deaf and feel like I have strengths with visual art, but now having to think about how I could incorporate sound into my art was a little bit scary. I didn't know what its purpose was for me. I had always made my mark as a visual artist, so it was completely new territory. But it's kind of ironic because as a visual artist, I feel like I never actually found my real voice as an artist. It wasn't until I started delving into the world of sound that I found my voice.

What sort of visual art did you do?

Painting, mostly. Some abstract, some representational art, but with painting, I always felt like it was other artists' styles or other artists' voices that ended up on the canvas, and I really struggled to come into my own. But looking back at that time, I feel like I've had to work with so many different interpreters whose voices became *my* voice. I work with a huge number of interpreters—men, women, people from all ages, all different ethnicities and backgrounds—and each interpreter has their own voice. And I kind of feel like my personality gets filtered by their voice *and* their personality. So I've become fascinated with the process of how the interpreter represents me with *their* voice. So I've tried to then incorporate many different voices into my artwork. So now my main focus is "leasing" voices. I like to say using an interpreter is actually a way of "leasing" their voice. I'm kind of a collaboration whore in general; I work with people on so many different projects. I work with musicians, artists, interpreters and the like, so I've kind of moved into exploring that relationship and that collaboration as pieces of art themselves.



Your work really attempts to respond to the societal stereotypes and the value of the Asian voice, but how exactly do you use your art to respond to this notion that you and I [as Asian-American women] are expected to be seen and not heard?

I've been starting to ask myself more about my background and how my culture has influenced my artwork. I think a lot of my artwork has to do with adaptation, and I think the Korean community is very good at behaving similarly and almost behaving like a school of fish -- where once one moves, we all move together. And deaf people are really similar to that; we both have collectivist cultures. So I think assimilating to that and adapting is big part of my artwork, and I think that some of that has to do with my Korean background. But at the same time, I think American and deaf culture also shape my artwork. But I have to add that I was never the "quiet kid." I was never that "seen and not heard" child that you described. I was always vocal, loud, and a little bit rambunctious. That was always my personality. I also know that Korean culture has a high respect for authority and for the hierarchy that age brings so maybe my response was a little bit "anti-hierarchy". But I'm also trying to figure out how much my art has been influenced by the Korean aspect of me, the American aspect of me, and the Deaf aspect of me. I think when people think about me, they think about me as a deaf person first and tend to not think about me as an Asian American or a Korean-American. I also think my identity is being deaf, and part of that is because that's a visual aspect of who I am—people see my signing and immediately go to "deaf." And because I use American Sign Language, I also identify primarily as a deaf person. I got a small scholarship that was based in Queens, New York, and I've gone to Korea once, but even when I'm hanging out with other Korean people, it's a little bit interesting because I'm signing and not speaking Korean. I think that within many cultures, including Korean culture, there exists social stigma towards disability. Even in American culture, there's a stigma against disability, which then again leads me to put my disability as my main identity because it's called out so often.

Right. So, is your concept of "sonic identity" related to what you are describing?

I don't think so. I think the sonic identity that I describe is really more just about sound. For example, I don't use my voice when I sign. Other deaf people sometimes use their voice. Sometimes I'll laugh a little bit or make *some* noises, but I generally don't use my voice. I think sonic identity relates more to how you operate and navigate through the world, for example using a telephone or just using a verbal language to communicate to other people. Imagine if you all of a sudden became deaf; you would have a whole different identity.

Going back to when you were growing up, what did your parents think about you pursuing your career as an artist, let alone a sound artist?

When I was young, my parents told me the typical careers that all Asian parents want their kids to go into: lawyer, doctor, something that was going to pay very well—six figures at least. But because of my upbringing in a very diverse neighborhood in California, I had a lot of friends who weren't Korean and who were deaf and who were Mexican, White, etc., So my parents slowly came around to the idea that I could be whoever and whatever I wanted. I wasn't really in the Korean community growing up, but me and my parents did go to the Korean church, and they were much more involved in the Korean community than I was. I wasn't as involved for two reasons: I was deaf and I used sign language. But, again, my parents slowly started coming around to the idea that I didn't have to be a doctor or a lawyer, so I ended up moving to New York and I had a few odd jobs. I went to grad school at the School of Visual Arts, and that's when my parents started to get worried because they knew that I was pursuing art full time and they didn't perceive art as a viable option. They were like, "What are you going to do?! How are you going to find a job?! Are we going to have to support you for the rest of your life?!" Then I graduated from SVA, and I decided to go back to grad school again at Bard...I didn't really *ask* for their blessing, but I received their blessing when I decided to go back. I think my parents knew that something was changing in me. I think that they knew this was a point of big growth for me and that it was going to be beneficial, so that was really nice. My parents always tried to keep an open mind, and I think deaf culture and Korean culture butt heads because I feel like Koreans have a certain number of expectations and limits that are imposed on people, but my parents really did *try* to keep an open mind. My parents learned American Sign Language, which I think is really rare. For most of the deaf Koreans and Asians I know, their parents never learned sign language, and I feel that my parents were very, very supportive of me as a deaf person—so supportive that they learned American Sign Language to communicate with me, and I feel like I am very lucky in that sense.

Just out of curiosity, what do other deaf Asian people whose parents *don't* learn ASL do?

They write back and forth, use their voice and try to have their children read their lips, or they have a home sign that they create just within their home, but that's not really a language. They come up with "food" or "sleep"—simple things. I don't really have the statistics or numbers on that, but I know it's a lot. And it's not just Asians, but it's deaf people in general. A lot of deaf people's parents don't learn ASL, but I can't imagine not being able to fully communicate with my parents and what kind of impact that has on a child. In all languages it is natural for people to have to ask for clarification. Imagine the misunderstandings and miscommunications that occur when two people are using two different modalities and languages. I think a lot of the problems that plague that deaf community could actually be solved if parents just learned American Sign Language.

Wow.

But going back to talking about the deaf community, I don't want to paint a picture that deaf people are socially isolated or "outcasts," because I don't think that's true. I think the way the deaf community rallies together has really [created] a culturally rich identity, especially within the States. But I'm just giving you the bigger picture of how lucky I am to have parents who sign, and how rare that is within the deaf community. I mean, I just don't understand why parents don't learn Sign. It's a little bit ridiculous to me, but it happens and is pretty common. I guess it could be a product of the system at large in which ASL is looked down upon. Even within our educational system, American Sign Language is looked down upon, so I think that leads to some of it, too.

How does the Internet inform your work though? Especially since it's kind of eliminated these sonic social cues that inform our responses?

I think technology has allowed me, and everybody else, to get more information. I grew up in a time when the Internet was not around. I had to depend on my mom to always call and make plans for me if I wanted to go to a friend's house. I always had to use paper and a pen to write notes back and forth. I remember the first phone I had that I could actually type on was a Motorola WyndTell. I remember being so excited to send an "SMS" message; that was before we even called it text messaging. And before that time, I didn't have access to any of that. With Wikipedia and with all the other resources that are available on the internet, information is limitless. You can spend all day on the Internet learning more and more and finding more things out without ever ceasing. But at the same time, as the Internet is getting older and maturing, it's evolving into something a little bit different. As you mentioned before, things used to be very text heavy with blogs, but now things are moving to being more video heavy with sound, and things aren't being captioned. The internet *was* very accessible for deaf people being that it was in text, but now moving towards a more video-based internet where people are speaking and there's music, it's becoming less accessible. So it's kind of like this arc that we've gone through.

That's interesting. So, I guess in general, "BuzzFeed culture" has kind of been a detriment. But it's also given birth to a way for women of color to broadcast their thoughts.

Exactly. I love Vine because it kind of started as making 6-second GIFs, really. But now, it's becoming more and more of a medium for spoken language. I'm hoping in the future that things can become more accessible, but one concern is actually with Siri. Siri hasn't made life easier, but it's making people less willing to be adaptive to difference. Moving this back to a conversation about women with color, I think being a woman of color is full of complexity. Sometimes I think women of color are asked "double," because they're asked as a woman but also as a woman of color. I think we have to "double-adapt" to things. For example, in Korean culture, it's not polite to ask too much of others, so you navigate that world coming from a very anxious perspective.

Totally, yet the Internet has enabled a lot of us to reach a wider platform, and subsequently has created a tight-knit, online community made up of women of color.

I don't feel like I'm in that community. I do recognize other people of color, and I think that there is a relationship there, but I don't think I have a strong presence in the women of color community. I think I have a strong presence in the artist and the deaf community. I feel like I do have a stronger awareness of women of color in the artist community. Also, in the Sound Art world, the stronger presences are typically men. Usually they are white, hearing men as well, so I am kind of their "token" Sound Artist. I'm a woman, I have a disability, I'm a person of color, so I kind of feel like I check all the boxes all of these white men that are present in the Sound Art world. It's cool to receive this recognition for being a women of color, a sound artist, and being deaf, but at the same time, I'm kind of an outsider in the core women of color community.

The whole idea of "tokenism" has always bothered me, so in this sea of white, hearing men in the Sound Art community, has it ever gotten to you?

Sometimes I feel like I'm a guest in their community. I guess it sometimes bothers me, but it depends on how they present and respond to my work. If they treat me like a colleague and were coming at it from a common ground, and if there's mutual respect, then I feel like it's okay. If they're coming at me to be a "token" and that's the approach they're taking, then it does bother me.

What is in the near future for you?

I'm going to be speaking at Art Dubai in March, as well as doing a little bit of a performance. Then I've got a lot more talks coming up throughout the year. I'm going to Seoul, Korea to do some performance there, but right now I'm mainly focusing on my exhibitions that are currently up. The future is a bit untold.

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