

Christine Sun Kim: ASL and Deaf Identity in Art

by

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Introduction

One of the major honors in an artist's life is to be asked to sing the National Anthem at a Super Bowl. Next to the halftime show it is the most anticipated announcement. But another less recognized honor is being asked to interpret the Anthem in sign language for d/Deaf¹ viewers. In 2020, that honor fell to deaf Artist Christine Sun Kim. The request was made by the National Association of the Deaf, the oldest civil rights organization in the United States and the group responsible for signing for the Super Bowl since 1992.² Kim was chosen because she views representation as an important aspect of a marginalized groups sense of belonging.³ She hoped to represent the Asian d/Deaf community; she was the first Asian American deaf woman to sign the National Anthem.⁴ Journalist Ann Friedman noted that Kim worked endlessly in the months prior to February 2, along with another interpreter who would be responsible to cue her during the performance so she would "remain in sync" with the vocalist.⁵ For Kim, signing the National Anthem on the biggest stage was an opportunity to showcase her d/Deaf identity, celebrate her language, and her national pride. Kim stated, "I wanted to express my patriotism and honor the country that I am proud to be from—a country that, at its core, believes in equal rights for all citizens, including those with disabilities."⁶

¹ I am aware and know the difference in 'deaf' with a lowercase 'd' referring to the loss of hearing as a medical condition and 'Deaf' with an uppercase 'D' as referring to the cultural aspect of a Deaf community and its members. Since I am not an expert on differentiating when to use 'd' or 'D' I will use d/Deaf when needed. If it is clear that it is referring to the medical condition than I will use the lowercase 'd.' If it is used in a quote, it will be quoted as written.

² Ann Friedman, "Christine Sun Kim: On What Listening Looks Like," *The Gentlewoman Magazine*, 24 (Autumn-Winter 2021): 160.

³ Zachary Small, "Christine Sun Kim, the Transgressive Deaf Artist, Will Sign the National Anthem Alongside Demi Lovato During the Super Bowl." *Artnet News*. January 28, 2020, 3.

⁴ "Artist Christine Sun Kim on 'Deaf Rage,' the Super Bowl and the Power of Sound." *PRI's The World*, 13 Feb. 2020.

⁵ Friedman, "Christine Sun Kim," 160.

⁶ Christine Sun Kim, "I Performed at the Super Bowl. You Might Have Missed Me.: Disability," *New York Times (Online)*. New York, United States: New York Times Company. February 3, 2020.

The exposure on the Super Bowl broadcast did not go as expected. The camera pulled away a few seconds into her performance and d/Deaf individuals watching on their television sets were left disappointed. This moment highlighted a larger issue which continues to this day: no matter what television network is airing the Super Bowl; they continue to turn away from the signer and highlight the vocalist or the football players. Scholar Michael Davidson noted that the method of using an interpreter for certain audiences is a privilege gained by the American with Disabilities Act. In fact, however, “when one’s language does not conform to the dominant version” it is a right that is not necessarily exercised equally.⁷ This paper examines in depth both Kim’s embrace of ASL and also places it within questions of normalcy and identity in her art.

Normalcy and Deafness in Disability Theory

Social interactions, language—sign language in this case—family interactions, upbringing, education, and personal beliefs all comprise socially accepted behaviors, cultural norms, and expectations. They help inform a person's d/Deaf identity and set norms that disabled people are expected to adhere. Nevertheless, these are only constructs. Many disability historians agree that if disability is a social construct, it is also accompanied by considerable fear in the larger “normal” population. Scholars Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky explain that these anxieties arise from the “most basic of modern, and particularly American, cultural values and social training. Americans often perceive disability—and therefore people with disabilities—as embodying that which Americans fear most: loss of independence, of autonomy, of control; in other words, subjection to fate.”⁸ Scholar Lennard J. Davis argues that we live in a world of

⁷ Michael Davidson, *Distressing Language: Disability and the Poetics of Error* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 220.

⁸ Paul K. Longmore and Lauri Umansky, Editors, “Introduction: Disability History: From the Margins to the Mainstream” in *The New Disability History: American Perspectives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 6-7.

norms that influence the way people live, think, and act. He believes that the important part of understanding the disabled body is to understand the “how and why” of the thoughts of “normal” and that norms did not always exist, they were constructed in the concept of the “ideal body.”⁹ He declared, “the “problem” is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the “problem” of the disabled person.”¹⁰

A corollary to this “problem” is the question of paradigms and exemplars. Davis continues to explain that the human body as visualized in art was the ideal body and that the models used, such as Aphrodite and Venus, cannot be found in this world, so therefore anyone who does not conform to the “ideal body.” As Davis points out, “the central point here is that in a culture with an ideal form of the body, all members of the population are below the ideal.”¹¹

Awareness and Communication

Through her artwork, artist Christine Sun Kim, is bringing awareness of ideals and norms, all the while working in her main form of communication, American Sign Language (ASL). In spite—or perhaps because of—her ill-fated Super Bowl appearance, she is also highlighting her d/Deaf identity for the world to see and learn from. But her impact goes beyond her television broadcast in 2020. Through her experiences growing up, her educational journey, and her life as an artist, she has developed her own identity and what it means to her and led her to develop a strong self-identity. She is shaped by her experiences and her language, both difficulties and triumphs of each. She has stated, “I strongly identify myself as a Deaf person who communicates in ASL, and it clearly shapes but does not define my practice as an artist. In

⁹ Lennard J. Davis, “Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, edited by Lennard J. Davis (New York and London: Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 2.

a way, I'm subconsciously proving that ASL is as legit as any other language through my work."¹²

As a d/Deaf artist, Kim exceeds traditional boundaries. By interacting with ASL as both a language and an aesthetic form, Kim invites audiences to rethink the ways in which they understand and value different modes of communication. Deaf Identity, American Sign Language, and visual artistry are interwoven into Kim's inspiring creative practice to challenge public opinions of d/Deaf culture and communication while advocating for the recognition and appreciation of ASL as a salient and important form of cultural expression.

¹² Paulette Beete, "Art Talk with Sound Artist Christine Sun Kim," *National Endowment for the Arts*, March 27, 2017.

Chapter 1: The History of ASL and Changing Experiences of Deaf Identity

In drawing upon American Sign Language (ASL) in her art, Christine Sun Kim pulls from a rich but also fraught tradition. This legacy runs deep in American culture. At the same time, ASL and deaf oppression are closely linked.

In colonial North America, colonists' views of deaf people were locally driven. There were communities in colonial America where deafness was accepted and, in these communities, deaf people were able to achieve varying degrees of social integration, marrying, contributing to their communities, and raising families. At the same time, even this degree of acceptance by their local communities was often conditional and many deaf people still faced exclusion, socially and religiously, and were assumed to be ineducable.¹³

On the other hand, there were also some communities where deafness was not caused by an illness but was hereditary, promoting a different form of social integration. Perhaps the most well-known of these groups was located on Martha's Vineyard, where it is known not only for its cohesive existence, but also its development of an early form of sign language. From the eighteenth to the twentieth century, this community of deaf individuals mixed with the local population but also maintained a strong sense of identity. Anthropologist Nora Ellen Groce has expressed that deafness was inherited through recessive genes and that eighty-five percent of deaf islanders were born to hearing couples.¹⁴ Because this large population of deaf individuals lived among hearing individuals, both sides knew and communicated in sign language.

Historians John Vickrey Van Cleve and Barry Crouch suggest that “the deaf and hearing citizens

¹³ Susan Burch, editor, *Encyclopedia of American Disability History* (New York: Facts on File, Inc: An Imprint of Infobase Publishing, 2009), 233.

¹⁴ Nora Ellen Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 22.

were so integrated that deaf people did not form a community apart from their hearing fellows. Both the hearing and the deaf persons used sign language, and deaf individuals usually chose hearing persons for spouses.”¹⁵ Scholars do not know where the Islanders learned their form of sign language, but Groce suspects that it may have been strongly influenced by the form of sign language used in England. In this way, she explains, “the sign language used on the Vineyard seems to have had a considerable time depth and thus may have been based on an English sign language.”¹⁶ Their form of sign language was relatively easy to use and allowed individuals to communicate with each other. Scholar Robert J. Hoffmeister speculates that it is unclear when Martha’s Vineyard’s form of sign language first began, but hearing residents being fluent in their own form of signed communication suggests that humans have an inner tendency to learn languages easily, whether signed or spoken.¹⁷ No matter its origins and early influences, the language in use here would go on to shape ASL.

More broadly, the early republic saw a more formal recognition of deaf people. According to Groce, early census surveys provide a general view of the deaf population. She explains that “the general view of the deaf in nineteenth-century America can perhaps best be summed up in the census tables, where “the deaf” were included in the broad and demeaning category of “defectives” (United States [sic] Federal Census 1830-1900).”¹⁸ Furthermore, throughout the eighteenth century there were no schools dedicated to the education of deaf people in the colonies. The deaf learned from their families or they remained uneducated. Dr. William Thornton was the first to call attention to the educational needs of deaf people. In his

¹⁵ John Vickrey Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1989), 1.

¹⁶ Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, 73.

¹⁷ Robert J. Hoffmeister, "The Resilience, Adaptation, and Evolution of American Sign Language," *Society for American Sign Language Journal* 4, No. 2, Article 3 (Fall/Winter 2020), 8.

¹⁸ Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, 98-99.

1793 essay “On Teaching the Surd, or Deaf, and Consequently Dumb, to Speak” Thornton explains:

A deaf person not perfectly skilled in reading words from the lips, or who should ask any thing in the dark would be able to procure common information by putting various questions, and by telling the person that, as he is deaf, he requests answers by signs, which he will direct him to change according to circumstances.—If he had lost his way, if he enquired for any one, if he wanted to purchase any thing, and in all the common occurrences of life, his speech would be so useful, that it would certainly more than repay the trouble of obtaining it; especially as it would be a mode of facilitating every other acquirement.¹⁹

A decade later, Francis Green, a father of a deaf boy, took a census of deaf people in Massachusetts with the assistance of local clergymen and produced seventy deaf people. He used that information and estimated that there was approximately five hundred deaf people in the United States at the time. He hoped his census data would convince the Massachusetts legislature of the necessity for a school for the deaf. He died in 1809 without realizing his dream.²⁰

In fact, the founding of the first formal school for deaf children changed this situation considerably. Established in 1817, the first school for the deaf was opened in Hartford, Connecticut. It was first named the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons, and it was founded by Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, Mason Cogswell, and Laurent Clerc, a French immigrant who became the first teacher of the deaf who was deaf

¹⁹ William Thornton, “Cadmus, or a Treatise on the Elements of Written Language, Illustrating, by a Philosophical Division of Speech, the Power of Each Character, Thereby Mutually Fixing the Orthography and Orthoepy. With an Essay on the Mode of Teaching the Deaf, or Surd and Consequently Dumb, to Speak. By Wm. Thornton, M. D. Honored with the Magellanic Gold Medal, by the Philosophical Society, in December 1792.” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 3 (1793): 319.

²⁰ Jack R. Gannon, *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2012), 1.

himself.²¹ Cogswell set out to create a school for his deaf daughter Alice might be educated. He recruited his neighbor, Gallaudet, to help in his endeavor. Gallaudet first traveled to England to study deaf education in an institution there but did not find what he was looking for. He traveled to Paris to study at the Royal Institution. Upon meeting with Abbe Sicard, successor to l'Épée as head of the Royal Institution for the Deaf in Paris, he was introduced to Laurent Clerc, a former student. When he returned to the United States, Laurent Clerc volunteered to come with him to help in the establishment of the school and become the first deaf teacher.²²

While Laurent Clerc, along with Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Mason Cogswell, was founding the first school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, he brought to the United States a new form of French sign language. In the mid-eighteenth century, Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Épée, upon seeing two deaf girls communicating in their informal mixture of signs, took the signs and added a more sophisticated structure to them to form what has become known as sign language.²³ According to journalist Jake Nevins, l'Épée did not invent or create the language, he learned it from deaf individuals. In this way, he “merely repaired what he found defective in it.”²⁴ These methods were formalized in 1760 when l'Épée founded the first free school for the Deaf later known as the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes in Paris.²⁵ After l'Épée's death in 1789, his efforts were carried on by Roch-Ambroise Cucurron Sicard, known as Abbé Sicard. The latter would usher in a golden period in Deaf history and help sign language be recognized as the “natural” language of the Deaf.²⁶

²¹ Ibid, 16.

Today it is located in West Hartford, where it moved to in 1921, and is called the American School for the Deaf.

²² Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 30-37.

²³ Jake Nevins, “American Sign Language Finds Its Spotlight,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/t-magazine/american-sign-language-asl-deaf-culture.html>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

As Van Cleve and Crouch explain, “Clerc was not only skilled in teaching deaf students, but he had the virtue of being an exemplary model of what a deaf person could become—educated, industrious, socially skilled.”²⁷ Methods of communication and instruction were conducted in a “standardized sign system modeled after the methodical signs developed by l’Épée in Paris,” including the fingerspelling brought to America by Clerc and writing in English.²⁸ With the establishment of this school and the introduction of methods of teaching developed in France, Clerc also brought a form of sign language that would contribute to the system in use today.

And yet, Sign Language already existed in the United States, including systems of home sign that were created in deaf communities. Most prominent among these, of course, was the largest and arguably oldest in use at Martha’s Vineyard.²⁹ This earlier form of signing, linguist Ted Supalla and scholar Patricia Clark argue, was combined with forms brought to the new school by other d/Deaf students from all parts of the United States. The latter forms of language, called ‘home sign,’ were combined with the systems brought from France by Clerc and Gallaudet. This incorporation formed ASL.³⁰

Along with their teachers, the d/Deaf would perfect the use of American Sign Language, thus assuring that ASL would become a leading factor in establishing a deaf identity and culture. There are many examples of organizations and cultural programs that flourished during the nineteenth century, including deaf public entertainments, public associations, and deaf social clubs. Deaf stage and performance were especially significant. Gallaudet College established a

²⁷ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 37.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 45.

²⁹ Gannon, *Deaf Heritage*, 359.

³⁰ Ted Supalla and Patricia Clark, *Sign Language Archaeology: Understanding the Historical Roots of American Sign Language* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2014), 16.

deaf theater program that featured deaf actors that used ASL to conduct the plays; this program continued to flourish well into the twentieth century. The University also mounted a dramatic club in which actors were invited to audition and the fraternities and sororities also mounted their own plays.³¹

And yet, although Deaf culture began to proliferate in the late nineteenth century, it was increasingly threatened by the late 19th century rise of a different, assimilationist approach. Oralism developed as a method of teaching in which, instead of using signs, the students would learn through lipreading and they would be taught to speak.³² Supalla and Clark insist that “the oral method is meant that in which signs are used as little as possible; the manual alphabet is generally discarded altogether; and articulation and lip-reading, together with writing, are made the chief means as well as the end of instruction.”³³ The first proponent of an oral education was Horace Mann, who challenged sign language and called for the use of oral methods in America.³⁴ He and other oralists believed that sign language was the problem in the education of the deaf. They blamed it for deaf children’s lack of speech and their poor grasp of the English language.³⁵ In 1880 at the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, commonly known as the Milan Congress, oralism or manualism (the use of sign language) were discussed. After a vote, the methods of oralism were adopted nearly unanimously. Only the Americans present voted against the measure, which suggested the ascendancy of ASL in the United States.³⁶ Gannon stated that “the Americans opposed the decision, along with Richard Elliott, headmaster of the

³¹ Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 103-104.

³² Gannon, *Deaf Heritage*, 360.

³³ Supalla and Clark, *Sign Language Archaeology*, 31.

³⁴ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 112.

³⁵ Gannon, *Deaf Heritage*, 361.

³⁶ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 110.

London Institution. The Americans favored the combined system which employed both speech and sign language depending on the needs of the child.”³⁷ In spite of such insistence, the convention adopted measures to diminish sign language. First and foremost, it was deemed that this “method of articulation should have the preference over that of signs in the instruction and education of the deaf and dumb.” Furthermore, it was stated, “the pure oral method ought to be preferred.”³⁸

Even as deaf culture in the nineteenth century burgeoned, it suffered setbacks, especially after the Milan Congress when sign language was banned from schools. Certainly, in private clubs, d/Deaf individuals were free to use sign language, a form of communication that came naturally to them. The value of these clubs was often debated. Proponents insisted that they served a purpose: human interaction, provided information, and forged deaf consciousness. As scholars Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames clarified that d/Deaf people “frequently alienated from the rest of society because of a communication barrier, deaf people were inclined to form separate clubs where they could socialize with others like themselves.”³⁹ Oralists, however, argued that the clubs could isolate deaf individuals from the world around them.⁴⁰

Oralist arguments were propounded by many significant and influential figures at the time, including the inventor Alexander Graham Bell. A Eugenicist, Bell believed deafness to be a curse to the individual involved. According to Van Cleve and Crouch, he considered deafness to be a threat to the social order, and felt that deaf people weakened the society in which they

³⁷ Gannon, *Deaf Heritage*, 65.

³⁸ E. M. Gallaudet, “The Milan Convention,” *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb* 26, no. 1 (January 1881): 5-6.

³⁹ Doris Zames Fleischer and Frieda Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement: From Charity to Confrontation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 17.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 17.

lived.⁴¹ In his 1883 *Memoir: Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race* Bell asserted that “the lack of articulate speech should also be noted as an indirect cause of segregation in adult life, operating to separate deaf-mutes from hearing persons. Hence, instruction in articulation and speech-reading should be given to every pupil.”⁴² Staking out his position on sign language and oralism Bell insisted that, “the segregation of deaf-mutes, the use of the sign language, and the employment of deaf teachers produce an environment that is unfavorable to the cultivation of articulation and speech-reading, and that sometimes causes the disuse of speech by speaking pupils who are only deaf.”⁴³ He believed that by teaching only using signs and putting students in residential schools, students were further segregated. This would cause them to only socialize with other deaf people, and thus they would marry only deaf-mutes like themselves. But he also called for several steps to prevent “the formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race,” including taking “preventative measures” which he insisted were a “most promising method of lessening the evil.” These included the need to “(1.) *Determine the causes that promote intermarriages among the deaf and dumb; and (2) remove them.*”⁴⁴ Bell insisted that deaf individuals’ preference to be around people like them was prompted by the use of sign language. He explains:

The immediate cause is undoubtedly the preference that adult deaf-mutes exhibit for the companionship of deaf-mutes rather than that of hearing persons. Among the causes that contribute to bring about this preference we may note: (1) segregation for the purposes of education, and (2) the uses, as a means of communication, of a language which is different from that of the people. These, then, are two of the points that should be avoided in the adoption of preventive measures.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 145.

⁴² Alexander Graham Bell, *Memoir: Upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1884), 47. <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=KQ02AQAAMAAJ&pg=GBS.PP1&hl=en>

⁴³ *Ibid*, 48.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 46.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 46.

Part of a larger effort to push deaf people to learn to live in a hearing world, these measures helped to further quash the use of sign language.

But many other voices argued for the assertion of ASL as part of Deaf identity. The National Association of the Deaf (NAD), originally called the National Convention of Deaf-Mutes, held its first meeting in Cincinnati in 1880. Notably, this took place at the same time the Milan Congress was being conducted in Italy. During this meeting they drafted a constitution, elected a deaf educator, Robert P. McGregor, as their first president. The group consisted of educated and successful deaf people representing twenty-one states, and still plays an important role in deaf politics to this day.⁴⁶ According to historian Susan Burch, the NAD was the first national organization to represent d/Deaf people and the association's main goals were to "eliminate employment, educational, and legal discrimination against Deaf citizens."⁴⁷ Above all, by showing d/Deaf individuals capabilities as citizens, it aimed to normalize the view of deafness.⁴⁸

Taken as a whole, NAD's advocacy revolved around a person's right to assert and maintain d/Deaf identity. Foremost among its arguments was its connection to language, in their case sign language. It also advanced a sense of social belonging, allowing a Deaf person to feel part of a group of like-minded individuals or even accepted by the hearing world. Such advocacy encourages hearing-impaired individuals to embrace their deafness, thus also finding a sense of community and place in society. And once deaf people identify with these aspects of their d/Deaf identity there comes the feeling of a sense of understanding, which makes them able

⁴⁶ Fleischer and Zames, *The Disability Rights Movement*, 17.

⁴⁷ Susan Burch, *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 88.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 91.

to embrace their deafness in new ways, allowing connection to their families, the outside world, and other deaf people. Oralism worked to assimilate d/Deaf people into the broader culture and took away their identity in their own d/Deaf culture. Oralists might argue that deaf people would be better educated if they learned through the oral method rather than the manual method. But ASL gave individuals a d/Deaf identity that was unique and their own. Historian Douglas C. Baynton explains that “when the cultural climate of the nineteenth century changed to make sign language objectionable, hearing people could simply say, “Away with sign language” and imagine that this could be accomplished. Deaf people could not.”⁴⁹ In fact, ASL was their natural language. It is what they were used to, what came naturally when they began to communicate. As Baynton indicates, they continued to use sign language and it was handed down, generation to generation.⁵⁰

In the end, oralist views began to lose traction in the twentieth century, with a general resurgence in the use and overall views of sign language. More and more people recognized that limiting a deaf child’s education to oralism did not guarantee success in spoken language and speech reading skills. Indeed, researchers indicated that a child’s development of speech was not stunted by the early use of sign language as first believed.⁵¹ These were not the only factors that changed societal attitudes toward ASL. Above all, experience with sign language itself played a growing and significant difference. The visibility of d/Deaf individuals on television, a shifting

⁴⁹ Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign Against Sign Language* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996). <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.purchase.edu/2027/heb02822.0001.001>. PDF., 10.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Gannon, *Deaf Heritage*, 364.

national attitude towards disabled Americans, and the rising support and visibility of d/Deaf leaders also play a part in changing opinions towards ASL.⁵²

New and persuasive scholarship also fostered resurgence of sign language back into society and in educational institutions as well. A leading scholar and linguist, Gallaudet College professor William C. Stokoe Jr., became fascinated by the sign language that was being used in his home institution. In 1957 he started the Linguistics Research Program, an after-hours and summer research project. Along with two deaf assistants he began filming deaf individuals making presentations in ASL and then spent countless hours studying the signs captured on film. His analysis identified the necessary ingredients of a distinct and unique language. The patterns that emerged, he argued, proved that sign language had a vocabulary different from English; morphemes, the signs “have meaning” as in other languages; and syntactical patterns.⁵³ Their overall conclusion was that, as scholar Susan Burch indicated, “ASL constituted a full-fledged human language.”⁵⁴ His research garnered interest from other linguists, establishing the study of American Sign Language as a credible research subject in an academic setting. Once this recognition was established, schools of higher learning, high schools, and private and public organizations, began to offer courses in ASL. People who were once ostracized for their deafness, were now being asked to be teachers.⁵⁵

As ASL became more and more accepted in society, d/Deaf people began to form vibrant and assertive communities. As neurologist Oliver Sacks observed, “there was [...] an increasing sense, specifically, that the deaf *were* a “people,” and not merely a number of isolated, abnormal,

⁵² Ibid, 365.

⁵³ William C. Stokoe, “The Study and Use of Sign Language.” *Sign language Studies* 1, no. 4 (2001): 375-376.

⁵⁴ Burch, *Encyclopedia of American Disability History*, 235.

⁵⁵ Gannon, *Deaf Heritage*, 367.

disabled individuals; a movement from the medical or pathological view to an anthropological, sociological, or ethnic view. [...] The entire country became more aware of the previously invisible and inaudible deaf; and they too became more aware of themselves, of their increasing visibility and power in society”⁵⁶ It is exactly this idea of visibility and power that Kim addresses in her artwork.

⁵⁶ Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 148-149.

Chapter 2: Biography of Christine Sun Kim

If Christine Sun Kim's work Kim is translational, using her understanding of ASL to explain d/Deaf lived experience to non-deaf audiences, she is also drawing on her own background. While she developed a d/Deaf identity in childhood, many factors informed her individual experiences of that identity.

Kim was born in 1980 in Southern California. Her parents emigrated from South Korea in the late seventies. Both her and her older sister, Jayne, were born deaf and their parents were hearing.⁵⁷ Growing up, she had to experience different forms of education and communication. When she was ten years old the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 made a significant difference in her life. Describing this event, she immediately "saw a big change." For example, she observed for the first time "there was captioning on TV."⁵⁸ Even more significantly, the law's passage meant that ASL became a significant factor in her life. Ultimately, with ADA mandates now in place, ASL teachers were sent to the home of d/Deaf kids to teach the parents how to sign. Her parents learned Signed Exact English which was initially quite foreign to them. For Kim's parents, ASL was "not a language, just a weird communication system," But ultimately, "it really helped us communicate as a family. My sister and I had Deaf friends, so we eventually turned to ASL" for social interaction.⁵⁹

Access to ASL interpreters shaped much of Kim's educational experience as well. In high school she inquired about taking a sculpture class but learned that because no interpreters were

⁵⁷ Ann Friedman, "Christine Sun Kim: On What Listening Looks Like," *The Gentlewoman Magazine*, 24 (Autumn-Winter 2021): 158. & Andrew Russeth, "Exposing the Limits of Language, Whether Spoken or Signed," *New York Times*, July 9, 2022.

⁵⁸ Friedman, "Christine Sun Kim," 158.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

available, it was off limits. Again, while in college at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), she inquired about taking studio art classes, but was denied for the same reason. In fact, she could only attend classes that already had deaf students enrolled in them.⁶⁰ Bearing this in mind, Kim spent much of her early career searching for an authentic artistic voice. She would earn her undergraduate degree from RIT in 2002 and moved to New York City, where she worked as an art assistant at the Lexington School for the Deaf and as an educator at the Whitney Museum. As journalist Andrew Russeth stated, she was all the “while trying to figure out her future.”⁶¹ While getting her M.F.A. at the School of Visual Arts in New York between 2004 and 2006, she started to explore what kind of art she wanted to make. Since her earlier education, high school then college at RIT, she was denied the ability to take studio art classes because there were no interpreters. These interpreters were her voice when in a public setting, and it was understandable for her to search for different ways to express herself. Kim would later insist that “I initially painted, because I had no voice, or didn’t know where to find it,” she says. Instead, she explains, “...I experimented by borrowing other artists’ narratives, motifs, styles. I wanted to know how they found their voice.”⁶²

Ultimately, Kim’s interest in ASL and d/Deaf communicative forms developed as she began to do more and more translational work. When she completed her MFA, she found work as a digital archivist with publisher WW Norton and the Whitney Museum of American Art hired her for a “few hours a month to set up resources and programming for Deaf museumgoers.”⁶³ In these two jobs she learned valuable lessons: her job as digital archivist taught her organizational

⁶⁰ Ibid, 158-159. Also, in Andrew Russeth, “Exposing the Limits of Language, Whether Spoken or Signed,” *New York Times*, July 9, 2022.

⁶¹ Russeth, “Exposing the Limits of Language, Whether Spoken or Signed.”

⁶² Friedman, “Christine Sun Kim,” 159.

⁶³ Ibid.

skills and her job at the Whitney taught her “how to communicate art ideas to certain audiences.”⁶⁴ One of her tasks at the Whitney was the Video Blog Project, a video blog of information about various parts of the museum, such as artworks or exhibitions, featured on the Whitney website for d/Deaf or hearing impaired individuals. According to the website, this consisted of short videos of museum educators, who are deaf, conducting interviews, tours, or highlighting single works or exhibitions. These videos were conducted in ASL and strove to create opportunities for audiences within and outside of the New York City area to learn about the different forms of art exhibited in the Whitney Museum from the twentieth– and twenty-first century.⁶⁵ Kim also conducted tours in the museum for d/Deaf individuals in sign language which are called Whitney Signs. According to Whitney Museum’s website, these tours enable d/Deaf visitors to experience what all the galleries have to offer, such as modern and contemporary art. They are conducted in ASL and on average take place each month.⁶⁶ Kim conducted tours for d/Deaf individuals only and another tour for both d/Deaf and hearing individuals.⁶⁷ In this way, Kim served both the d/Deaf art community and also connected with the hearing.

She reached a turning point in 2008, however, when she began a residency in Berlin and began to develop an interest in sound art. As she visited galleries where artists were exploring sound as an artistic medium she was forced to push at artistic boundaries.⁶⁸ Kim noticed

⁶⁴ Beete, “Art Talk with Sound Artist Christine Sun Kim.”

⁶⁵ “Vlogging About Art: The Whitney Video Blog Project.” December 20, 2011. Accessed April 5, 2024. <https://whitney.org/whitney-stories/vlogging-about-art-the-whitney-vlog-project>.

⁶⁶ “Whitney Signs.” n.d. Accessed April 5, 2024. <https://whitney.org/education/access/whitney-signs>.

⁶⁷ “Whitney Stories Video: Christine Sun Kim.” July 23, 2014. Accessed April 5, 2024. <https://whitney.org/whitney-stories/christine-sun-kim>.

In this video, Kim explained that there are two tours a month with the second having an interpreter available for hearing individuals.

⁶⁸ “Artist Christine Sun Kim on 'Deaf Rage,' the Super Bowl and the Power of Sound.”

how sound art was a thing and became intrigued about the concept. I am always drawn to conceptual art and the ideas behind a piece or installation, she said. For me, sound had always been an idea—an intangible space that separated me from others—so I was curious about how art could transcend sound and vice versa.⁶⁹

After the residency in Berlin, she enrolled in the M.F.A. in music and sound program at Bard College. In this course of study, Kim drew from her own background. Due to her deafness, she was raised to believe that sound was not a part of her life. But Kim noticed how sound was an important aspect of her surroundings. As scholar Anna K. Benedikt explains, Kim began “by observing how people behave according to sound and how they respond to it.”⁷⁰ For example, in her childhood she was often told to “be quiet” because she unknowingly was making noises by slamming doors or scraping forks on plates. Thus, she learned of the social etiquette around sound, and it led to a larger curiosity.⁷¹

In this vein, she began experimenting with sound by using loudspeakers that respond to the lowest acoustic frequencies. Known as subwoofers,⁷² these speakers helped shape her 2012 *Speaker Drawing* (see Figure 1). Here she placed paint coated brushes and inked quills on wooden boards atop the loudspeakers or subwoofers. Pulsing with ambient noise, the speakers’ vibrations caused loaded paintbrushes to fall on the boards, thus producing minimalist

⁶⁹ Hannon, Molly. 2015. “How Christine Sun Kim, Deaf Sound Artist, Hears Everything: Christine Sun Kim’s Work Is an Expression of the Spaces Between Sound and Silence--the Many Dimensions That Are Overlooked Simply Because No One Can Hear Them.” *The Daily Beast*. New York, United States: *The Newsweek/Daily Beast Company LLC*. June 1, 2015.

⁷⁰ Anna K. Benedikt, ““Let’s Listen with Our Eyes...” The Deconstruction of Deafness in Christine Sun Kim’s Sound Art,” In *Under Construction: Performing Critical Identity*, edited by Marie-Anne Kohl (Basel, Switzerland: MDPI, 2021): 55.

⁷¹ Catriona Gray, “Good Vibrations,” *Harper’s Bazaar Art*, November 2016.

⁷² Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “subwoofer,” accessed April 4, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subwoofer>.

paintings.⁷³ The resulting abstract paintings were unpredictable, changing every time she engaged the practice.

While Kim began to rethink the character of sound, she also reconsidered the nature of ASL. For her, sign language was a medium in itself, and her art began to incorporate performance.⁷⁴ As journalist Friedman expressed “she began thinking about her interpreters as performers and her own ideas as the score.”⁷⁵ Her sound piece *Game of Skill 2.0* (2015) (see Figure 2), for example, is interactive and also incorporates concentration and awareness of surroundings in navigating the piece. A visitor is given a box filled with complex wiring and has two-foot-tall antenna-like protrusions extending from the box. Overhead are three taught wires covered in blue Velcro hanging from the ceiling. The goal is to continue walking while keeping the antenna protruding from the box touching the Velcro which triggers magnetic sensors along the way. While visitors complete this task a voice emits from the box telling a story. It continues to talk unless the visitor detaches from the Velcro. The faster visitors walk, the faster the voice talks. If a participant walks backwards, the vocal output inverts. Maintaining contact becomes a frustrating experience and if the antenna and Velcro are disconnected, the audio restarts. Feelings of frustration and defeat are exactly what Kim wants to elicit in this piece.⁷⁶ Recalling her own lived experience with deafness, Kim states, “It’s so easy for hearing people to take for granted what they hear, [...] having a TV on in the background, having a radio on, maybe even overhearing things in a restaurant, things that you pick up incidentally—this project forces you to think about what you’re hearing and really try to make sense of it.”⁷⁷

⁷³ Cassie Packard, “Deaf Artist Christine Sun Kim Is Reinventing Sound.” *Vice*, April 3, 2015.

⁷⁴ Friedman, “Christine Sun Kim,” 159.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Emily McDermott, “The Aural Artist,” *Interview Magazine*, December 14, 2015.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

As her art developed, Kim began to expand her work, turning toward systems of notation and conceptual ideas, all the while making ASL both poetic and musical. When one of her interpreters, sociologist Laura Mauldin, introduced her to ASL gloss, for example, she made the latter into an artistic form. Conceived as a rough writing system used to notate ASL, Kim observed how it is akin to musical notes. Thus, glossing can be highly descriptive.⁷⁸ Friedman describes glossing, as “a written notation system used to transcribe sign language, indicating not just the vocabulary but also the facial expressions, fingerspelling, pointing and other modes of communication that don’t exist in spoken languages.” At the same time, in works like *Degrees of Deaf Rage* (see figure 3) and *Time Owes Me Rest Again* (see figure 12), Kim expanded this idiom. Using quick nearly abstract marks jotted rapidly on paper, she imitates performed glossing. With the result she is “making hand-drawn conceptual scores on paper, using the conventions of sheet music to convey experiences that stretch far beyond the musical.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Emily McDermott, “How I Became an Artist: Christine Sun Kim,” *Art Basel* (March 2022): 3.

⁷⁹ Friedman, “Christine Sun Kim,” 159.

Chapter 3: Artworks Analysis

In Christine Sun Kim's artwork, deaf identity is often asserted but the artist also makes a case for inclusion and acceptance of both deafness and also ASL. Above all, her consistent concerns focus on the bias of hearing individuals, the lack of educational opportunities for deaf people and long-standing traditions of oralism. In her artworks Kim aims for audiences to understand Deaf people's desire to be seen and heard and understand the Deaf oppression they have experienced.

Degrees of Deaf Rage: Communicating in a Hearing World

In her artworks Kim wants to express d/Deaf life, but above all she aims for non-deaf people to understand deaf people's experiences in a hearing world. A series of six panels that were featured in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, *Degrees of Deaf Rage* 2018 (see figure 3) displays different levels of anger towards six different topics that range from everyday situations to educational settings. The amount of rage in each panel is shown in a format that is easily recognizable by viewers, such as right angles, obtuse angles, or acute angles. Journalist Ann Friedman observes that even before a viewer sees the title of one of the panels, "there is a palpable anger to the lines and arcs"⁸⁰ in the piece. These panels demonstrate Kim's frustration when encountering situations or people who deem her inability to hear and use of ASL as inferior. Her intention in making these panels is to teach these people to be more open to others all the while using a different form of communication that may be unfamiliar to them.

⁸⁰ Friedman, "Christine Sun Kim: On What Listening Looks Like," 160.

The first panel is provocatively titled *Degrees of Deaf Rage Within Educational Settings* (see figure 4). Each level of rage is captioned with Kim's explanation of the problems she encountered with the practice of teaching and its institutions. The lowest degree of rage, *acute rage*, is relegated to her anger at schools that do not allow deaf students to enroll in classes they want because there were no interpreters available; thus, they are relegated to the classes most popular with deaf students. Only these classes are assigned interpreters. As she lists the problems that were captioned her level of rage grew. *Legit Rage (or the Right angle)* addresses insufficiently trained interpreters, particularly the practice of hiring people who just learned sign language as interpreters for elementary school classes. Other captions deal with hearing people hiring other hearing people to teach ASL, tech students with no association to the d/Deaf community creating prototypes, such as signing gloves, and only reaching out later to test on d/Deaf people. These "innovations" are often introduced with no input by the d/Deaf community. Her *Reflex Rage* addresses hearing educators, audiologists, and doctors who encourage hearing parents to not use sign language with their deaf babies. At the same time, she suggests, many of the same people use baby signs for hearing babies. *Full on Rage* takes aim at the Milan Conference of 1880, where oralism was declared superior to sign language and banned the teaching of sign language in school.⁸¹

Degrees of Institutional Deaf Rage (see figure 5) deals with Kim's anger towards institutions that she either works with, speaks at, or interacts with on a daily basis. Her degrees of rage vary depending upon the caption. In this panel her caption for *acute rage*, which seems to be her lowest form of anger, is 'seating arrangement not set beforehand.' The *full on rage* is

⁸¹ Gallaudet, "The Milan Convention," 5-6.

captioned with ‘so much red tape that accessibility budget cannot be touched.’ In this panel she rages against such subjects as not assigning her more than one interpreter for a full day of work, videos that are long and they have no captions, organizers unwilling to compensate interpreters for their social or dinner hours, and AV teams who refuse to add lighting to make the interpreters visible to the deaf viewers. Much like the first panel, there are smudges from the charcoal, but these smudges are more evenly distributed throughout the panel. These create a hasty form of urgency throughout.

Degrees of My Deaf Rage in the Art World (see figure 6) highlights Kim’s annoyance with working with individuals or organizations with whom do not see the need to provide access to those in need. In this panel, the caption for *acute rage* is ‘Guggenheim Accessibility Manager.’ The caption for legit rage is ‘Bard MFA.’ *Obtuse rage* is labeled ‘visiting artists who aren’t comfortable with interpreters.’ *Straight up rage* is labeled ‘Rijksmuseum Front Desk Manager.’ *Reflex Rage*, which displays a different range of rage as was shown in the previous panels, is labeled with ‘curators who think it’s fair to split my fee with interpreters.’ And her *full on rage* identifies ‘museums with zero Deaf programming (and no Deaf docents/educators).’ As in the previous panels, the smudges from the charcoal are much darker and down the center of the panel and again mistakes are left in but crossed out.

Degrees of Deaf Rage in Everyday Situations (see figure 7) deals with her anger about experiences she contends with daily. Kim labeled the various degrees with captions such as ‘no apologies from assholes (audists),’ ‘no interpreters at meetings,’ ‘Fast food restaurant cashiers,’ ‘people who are secretly scared of us,’ ‘people who act as if we [d/Deaf people] don’t exist,’ and ‘Years of dealing with family and relatives who do not know sign language.’ This panel has smudges or charcoal down the center and along the top row of rages. Additionally, mistakes

were left in the artwork instead of starting over, which highlights anger. These technical errors bring an urgency to the work; when a person acts in an emotional manner, these drawings seem to express, they do not take the time to fix mistakes. As if to demonstrate this form of feeling, Kim had previously labeled '*straight up rage*' with the caption 'people who act we don't exist,' but instead seemingly changed the caption at the last minute, sloppily marking it out and relabeling it '*reflex rage*' instead.

Similarly, Kim further highlights her experiences in *Degrees of Deaf Rage While Traveling* (see figure 8). The lowest degree of rage, *acute rage*, is labeled 'uber driver calls instead of texting' and the highest degree of anger, *Full on rage*, is labeled 'flight attendant leaves suitcase on the runway because when asked in spoken English, no one claimed it.' Other degrees are labeled by Kim with 'important transit announcements are spoken in English only,' 'movies aboard the flight are with no captions,' 'flight attendants hitting you on the head with a bag of peanuts in order to get your attention,' and a seventh degree of rage called '*Cute Rage*' that is captioned with 'being offered a wheelchair at the arrival gate...and the Braille menu at restaurants.' As if to suggest the firmness of her anger, this panel has the least number of smudges from the charcoal and an added angle.

At the same time, this series suggests that interpreters feature as a large part of Kim's identity due to them being her voice in certain circumstances such as artist talks, interaction with hearing individuals, and speeches; her experiences, and especially the most negative situations, are featured in *Degrees of Deaf Rage Concerning Interpreters (Terps)* (see figure 9). The lowest degree of rage, *acute rage*, is captioned with 'Terps who can't take our feedback.' The highest degree of rage, which is a new angle called *Beyond Rage*, is captioned with 'fake Terps at News conferences' and it has no graphic that goes with it. Works like this suggest that Kim is so

enraged about fake terps that there is no angle that can describe her rage; inevitably, this panel has very little smudges and she also leaves the angle out. The other angles are captioned with situations such as ‘Terps who secretly self-congratulate themselves for ‘helping’ Deaf people,’ ‘Terps whose voices take over ours,’ ‘Terps who fail to make us sound as smart as we truly are,’ ‘Terps who take my contacts and use them for their own gain,’ and ‘confidentiality violations; code of ethics.’

According to scholar Michael Davidson, Kim uses different geometric angles to describe the artist’s anger at different institutions, situations, and people that exclude or minimize persons with hearing impairments access to education, institutions, traveling, and the art world.⁸² In this way, he states, “she incorporates her own versions of captions within the work itself, seizing the artist’s prerogative to define and explain her images.”⁸³ These are clearly borne out in various examples, from the panel *Degrees of Deaf Rage While Traveling*, ‘important transit announcements are spoken in English only,’ ‘movies aboard the flight are with no captions,’ or ‘flight attendants hitting you on the head with a bag of peanuts in order to get your attention.’

As Kim notes, "I always find that the best way to communicate with a wider audience who [is] not deaf is to use a format that people can easily understand." Instead, Kim takes a more analytical view. For her, they are "...like mathematical angles. How much rage [do] I have? You can see it in that size of the angle."⁸⁴ In each panel the captions headline an angle, such as a right angle, obtuse angle, or acute angle, echoing the forms found in mathematical equations,

⁸² Davidson, *Distressing Language*, 9.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 70.

⁸⁴ "Artist Christine Sun Kim on 'Deaf Rage,' the Super Bowl and the Power of Sound."

mimicking geometric shapes, and using illustrative colors to show the amount of rage she has about each situation.

Kim wanted the piece to be serious, but with a little humor thrown in. Journalist Janelle Zara explains, “Kim initially feared that the piece would make her look angry.” But instead, Kim insists, “humor brings a level of access, kind of like a meme...If I were just mad without the humor, I think it might be uncomfortable and people would leave. They wouldn’t do the complex contemplative work that I want them to do.”⁸⁵ For example, in the panel, *Degrees of Deaf Rage within Educational Settings* a viewer could find humor in the paradox presented in the caption for *Legit Rage (Right)*. The titles ‘Newly Trained Interpreters Hired for Elementary School Classes who Only Just Learned American Sign Language,’ and the caption, on the same panel, for *Reflex Rage*, which is ‘Hearing Educators, Audiologists, and Doctors Recommend Hearing Parents not to use Sign Language with Their Deaf Babies But are Totally Fine With Baby Signs for Hearing Babies’ are curious. Each suggests a superfluous and seemingly telling contradiction between deaf ‘normalcy’ and mainstream society’s expectations. At the same time, Kim also sees her art as a way of conveying deeper psychological trauma.

Stacking Traumas: Being Seen and Heard

When journalist Kate Brown interviewed Kim in 2020, the artist described a moment in Kim’s life where she was at a family dinner, and no one would use sign language or use her text translation app and thus include her in the discussion. As the artist recounted this experience she looked over at her daughter and realized that she did not want her child to witness this kind of

⁸⁵ Janelle Zara, “‘She’s Creating Her Own Language’: Christine Sun Kim’s Unique Sound Art.” *The Guardian*, March 24, 2022, 3.

treatment.⁸⁶ Kim states, “In my art career, people pay to come see my work. I’m an activist. I’m an empowered woman, but in my family, I’m not. I’m less than. That experience is very common for Deaf people.”⁸⁷ Similar experiences are expressed in Kim’s *Stacking Traumas* (2021) (see Figure 10).

A large mural that was displayed on the wall of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum in 2021 at the Washington University, St. Louis, *Stacking Traumas* is related to another panel, the much smaller *Three Tables III* (2020) (see Figure 11). The latter piece shows three tables stacked on top of each other, in three different levels, with legs extending to the bottom of the mural for each trauma. Musical notes are at the bottom of the tables. There are words written in between the lines of the three tables on each level. The bottom represents Dinner Table Syndrome, the middle represents Hearing People Anxiety, and the top represents Alexander Graham Bell. Each level signifies the various levels of trauma with Alexander Graham Bell being the greatest amount of trauma. The lines are not exactly straight and end in the form of musical notes representing the musical notes that you see on a piece of music sheet. In the smaller panel the words are squished between the lines.

What remains largely implicit in the smaller work achieves more clarity and depth in the larger mural, where there is more space for the words. In the mural, for example, Bell’s name appears on the ceiling of the curved ceiling of the museum space representing the trauma that d/Deaf people are still trying to hurdle.

⁸⁶ Kate Brown, “‘I Want to Be Able to Maintain My Clear Voice’: Artist Christine Sun Kim on Translating Her 2020 Into Trenchant New Drawings,” *Artnet News*, December 15, 2020. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/christine-sun-kim-profile-1931118>

⁸⁷ Ibid.

The first table, ‘Dinner Table Syndrome,’ is in response to Kim’s experience at the dinner table during the holiday and especially recalls how family members would not take the time to learn ASL or use her texting app. In the end, she felt left out. The second tier, “Deaf People Anxiety,” represents the unease that d/Deaf people feel when they experience contact with hearing individuals and cannot mount the barrier in communication between them.

Alexander Graham Bell is in the topmost tier because, according to Kim, because he remains a plague on the d/Deaf community. Not only was he a proponent of the oralist tradition and teaching, but, as journalist Jake Nevins noted: “for Bell’s part in thwarting sign language education and undermining Deaf culture, Kim considers him to be the community’s greatest historical scourge, a conviction that inspired the site-specific mural at Washington University in St. Louis [...]” In this way, place at the upmost rung, with “his name looming over the others, Bell remains a hurdle to be cleared.”⁸⁸ Kim’s sense of deaf oppression is evident in works like this, but she also notes a mutuality in such feelings.

Time Owes Me Rest Again: Expressing in ASL

With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, the world became a difficult and transfigured place, but simple functionality was especially fraught for d/Deaf and Hard of Hearing people. The d/Deaf community relies not just on the movement of hands, but also on facial expressions. When the world had to turn to wearing masks, these became a special barrier for the d/Deaf community, making it particularly hard to function and communicate. Journalist Ann Friedman observed, “the sudden necessity of protective face masks profoundly changed the way Christine interacted with the world. She doesn’t read lips, but she does rely on other

⁸⁸ Nevins, “American Sign Language Finds Its Spotlight.”

people’s lip movement to understand when they’re trying to get her attention.”⁸⁹ More directly Kim discovered that “I couldn’t figure out if they were talking to me or they weren’t talking to me because their mouths were covered. So I had to develop new observational skills for that situation.”⁹⁰ This conundrum could sometimes be positive. Friedman stated, “the masks forced people to communicate better, to put their thoughts into words and gesture more.”⁹¹ But this scenario also helped Kim to consider more deeply the expressive power of ASL. The third artwork by Christine Sun Kim called *Time Owes Me Rest Again 2022* (see Figure 12), shown in the Queens Museum (2023), explores the implications of these ideas.

The mural measured forty feet high and a hundred feet wide and it spanned the wall as a visitor entered the museum at the bottom of the stairs to go up to the second floor. Each word in the title is painted on the wall with lines that represent how the word is signed in American Sign Language (ASL). Similar to the way that actions are described in comic books by using lines to show action, Kim uses the same concept to show the action of the word in its form in ASL. For example, in ASL the signer taps their chest once to sign the word ‘me’ in ASL. Kim uses a thick dark line in curved lines around the word ‘me’ with two or three lighter lines to signify the motion of the finger touching the chest. Each of the words are expressed in the same manner with using darker and lighter lines to express movement. ‘Owes’ is expressed through two lines, one darker, drawn down to ground with several small lines coming up showing the joining of the finger with the palm of the other hand. The artwork is accompanied by a video showing the movement of the different signs on the wall in motion through computer graphics.

⁸⁹ Friedman, “Christine Sun Kim: On What Listening Looks Like,” 163.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

Describing how this work came about, Kim explained that the Queens Museum reached out to her a few years ago, but she was busy with scheduling issues. With Covid-19 lockdowns and other restrictions, however, she found herself with time, so she reached out to the Queens Museum. As discussions began to focus on what this mural would look like, she asked for context about the building and the area. Kim soon learned that Queens was, at one point, the epicenter of the pandemic. But more generally it is also one of the most diverse counties in the United States, and she began to reflect on language use in Queens and the variety of languages that co-exist.

With these ideas in mind, she imagined a simple declaratory sentence with five words: Time Owes Me Rest Again. The number of words seemed obvious to Kim who observed, “I usually work with fives and tens, that’s partly because of fingers: you have one hand or two hands and so a lot of my work speaks to that kind of symmetry.”⁹² She made a long list of signs in ASL and narrowed it down using the criteria of which signs touch body parts. She chose these five words from the narrowed down list. According to Kim, if you were to sign the sentence it would be in a different order, but she knew that hearing people understood English sentences best. Keeping in mind her goal of making her work translational, and aiming to appeal to more audiences, she is interested in words that mean many things.

But this mural also draws on a longer fascination for Kim, namely the link between sound and sign. When she first became interested in sound as a field of study, she was told to investigate visual sound onomatopoeia, including those that occur in comic books. Here, for example, words like ‘pow,’ ‘slap,’ or ‘bang’ are significant. “I do love when that bat swings in

⁹² Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz, “Access as Generative Site: In Conversation with Christine Sun Kim,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 54 (Autumn/Winter 2022): 51.

the comic book,” Kim enthused. With these, “you can see if it’s just like a minor swing, or if it’s a major swing, if it’s a soft swing, or hard swing, you can see if there are more lines, or it’s moving faster. If the lines are bolder, it’s moving harder.” But also, she indicates, they made her think more “about how that might work with Sign Language.”⁹³ In fact Kim admits to loving ASL language books with arrows that show how and where to move your hands. Ultimately, these reminded her of comic books’ onomatopoeias—and they felt notational.

In the end, Kim also uses this as an opportunity to work larger and in a more public setting. As she explains, “I started thinking about public art, what people see every day, and the idea of imposing our Deaf way of being onto hearing people’s everyday lives.”⁹⁴ Working on such a large scale allows her to tap into older ideas in a new way. As she explained to journalist Emily McDermott, “I feel a little like I’m functioning as an archivist, just like my old job. I’m forcing our place into the histories of art and humanity by creating work. The more I create, the more we appear in history and the more the Deaf voice is represented.”⁹⁵

Towards Better Communication

An enduring theme in Kim’s work in each of these pieces, ASL makes a clear and cogent argument for better communication between hearing and d/Deaf people as well as greater appreciation of Deaf culture and identity. As Kim observes, “sometimes hearing people don’t know what to do when they encounter a Deaf person, and we end up having to communicate their way.”⁹⁶ This problem is highlighted in her work in several ways. In many of her artworks

⁹³ Ibid, 51.

⁹⁴ McDermott, “How I Became an Artist.”

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Nevins, “American Sign Language Finds Its Spotlight.”

and even in her Sound Art pieces she addresses the use of captions in movies, TV, or other digital products. In the *Deaf Rage* series, she addresses it in the panel, *Degrees of Deaf Rage While Traveling*, (see Figure 8) in which she captions ‘Straight Up Rage’ with the words “Movies with no Captions on Plane.” The panel *Degrees of Institutional Deaf Rage*, (see Figure 3) is equally strident. In it she captions ‘*Obtuse Rage*’ with the phrase “Long Videos with Zero Captions.” In the panel for traveling, (see figure 8) she addresses the rage she feels toward the hearing world, especially when it leaves d/Deaf travelers out when important transit notifications are spoken in English and there is no notification done in ASL in order for d/Deaf travelers to receive the same announcement.

But communication can also take a more intimate form for Kim when these concerns play out on the familial level as well. The issue with family members not wanting to learn sign language or use Kim’s app to communicate is also addressed in the *Deaf Rage* series under the panel, *Degrees of Deaf Rage in Everyday Situations* (see Figure 7). Similarly, the drawing of ‘*Full on Rage*’ is captioned “Years of Dealing with Family and Relatives who do not know Sign Language.”

Everyone, whether deaf or not, wants to feel seen and heard, not ignored, or led to believe they do not exist. On the panel, *Degrees of Deaf Rage in Everyday Situations* Kim labeled ‘*Reflex Rage*’ with the caption of “People Who Act We Don’t Exist” (see Figure 7). Not being seen is one of her deepest concerns. But she does appreciate it when people or family who are hearing take the time to learn; in the end, this helps Kim and others like her feel seen. When her parents immigrated to the United States and had two deaf daughters, they decided to learn English and ASL to open communication between them. “It [was] really one of the biggest examples of respect [...] for me and my sister,” Kim said. “We felt seen, we felt valued, we felt

important. Like, I am here, I exist. And growing up, that was an important feeling to have. And I think it helped me to develop a strong self-identity.”⁹⁷

In the series of panels, *Degrees of Deaf Rage*, Kim uses captions to label the various levels of rage that are drawn on the panel. Davidson expressed that “the larger implication of these panels concerns how common sense assumptions about space, sound, and accessibility—not to mention what is displayed on museum walls—often exclude large populations. Instead of providing captions next to each panel, Kim incorporates her own versions within the work itself, seizing the artist’s prerogative to define and explain her images. And since her panels lack images in the conventional sense, they speak to the discursive environment in which objects appear in a museum or public venue.”⁹⁸

In the *Deaf Rage* series, Kim uses a lot of words with the diagrams of her level of rage, in *Stacking Traumas* she uses three words per tier. In *Time Owes Me Rest Again* she uses one term with each sign for a total of five words. The two murals loom over the visitor forcing them to take notice.

Kim’s artwork brings all aspects of her identity to life before the viewers. She tells the story of her own life, as an individual living with hearing impairment. But her artwork also encompasses the everyday realities experienced by many other d/Deaf people living in the world. The art may, on one hand, be read as a sort of narrative; on the other, it teaches non-deaf individuals what an average day in a deaf person’s life is like. In so doing it aims to bridge the gap between two worlds—that of the hearing with that of the deaf.

⁹⁷ "Artist Christine Sun Kim on 'Deaf Rage,' the Super Bowl and the Power of Sound."

⁹⁸ Davidson. *Distressing Language*, 70.

Conclusion

In her opinion piece in the *New York Times*, Kim stated, “why have a sign language performance that is not accessible to anyone who would like to see it?”⁹⁹ To most readers of the *Times*, Kim’s experience started and stopped with this one episode. But for Kim, it represented but one more expression of our understanding—or lack of experience—with ASL. On national television, she notes, the NFL was committed to making the Super Bowl more accessible to its viewers. Nevertheless, their decision to place attention on the faces of football players instead of the sign language interpreter’s performance negated all attempts of making all viewers feel included.¹⁰⁰

Of course, that experience has not deterred Kim, who is still proud of her performance and is appreciative of all the rights and privileges that the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 gave her. This includes watching television with captions, making phone calls with an online video platform, and having interpreters provided for her educational needs.¹⁰¹ As Kim says, “I have traveled to many countries and witnessed firsthand the lack of equality for deaf people all over the world, making me appreciate being an American even more. I realize that being a citizen of this country is not something to be taken for granted.”¹⁰²

A deaf identity includes many aspects. A sense of belonging may be included, especially when a Deaf person feels part of a group of like-minded individuals or even accepted by the hearing world. They can embrace their deafness once they feel this sense of belonging. And once they identify with these aspects of their Deaf identity there comes the feeling of a sense of

⁹⁹ Kim, “I Performed at the Super Bowl. You Might Have Missed Me.”

¹⁰⁰ Davidson, *Distressing Language*, 220.

¹⁰¹ Kim, “I Performed at the Super Bowl.”

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

community, that they are accepted into; such an understanding may help them embrace their deafness in a new way. It also suggests connections, both to their families, the outside world, and other Deaf people. But this sense of belonging may also include a Deaf person's connection to a language, in this case sign language. As discussed in this thesis, these connections are especially important in Kim's artwork.

Through her work, Christine Sun Kim also makes art that includes ASL as part of a larger effort to bring all sides of a community together. Inevitably, this includes not just the deaf but also the hearing. In this way, her work is translational, trying to reach out to the non-deaf community. Her art expresses the struggles that d/Deaf individuals encounter while navigating their daily lives. These ideas were summed up by Kim's own husband, artist Thomas Mader. He emphatically made his point by issuing a challenge to others wanting to investigate or learn from her artworks. In it he asked all of us to "recognize yourself in the pie chart segments, and act differently next time. [...] Be the person who learned from [her art] and takes the first step."¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Thomas Mader, "Oh Me Oh We," in *Christine Sun Kim: Oh Me Oh My*, edited by Rachel Seligman (New York: DelMonico Books, 2024), 71-73.

Appendix A

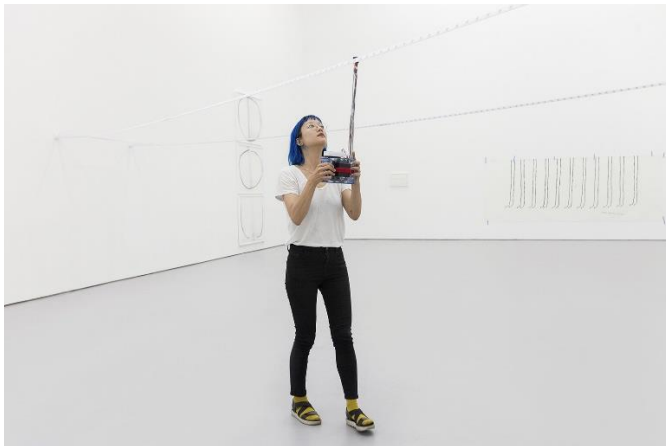
Figure 1



Christine Sun Kim, *Speaker Drawing* (2012)

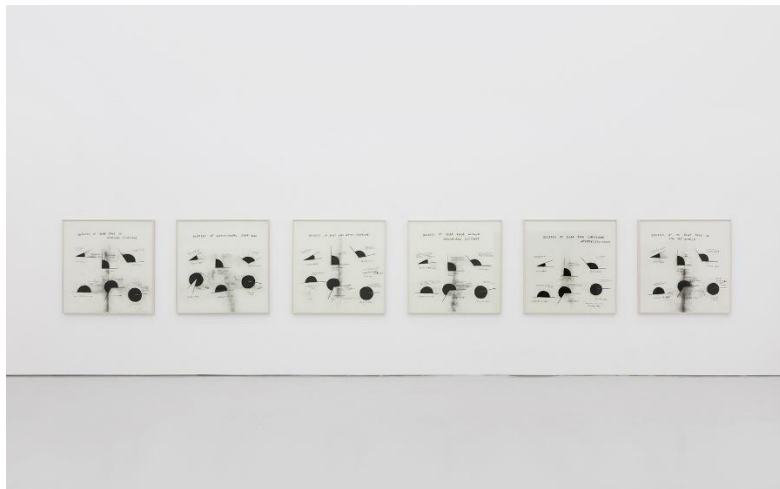
Photo Credit: Wilk, Elvia. "Artist Profile: Christine Sun Kim." *Rhizome.org*, October 30, 2015. <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2015/oct/30/artist-profile-christine-sun-kim/>

Figure 2



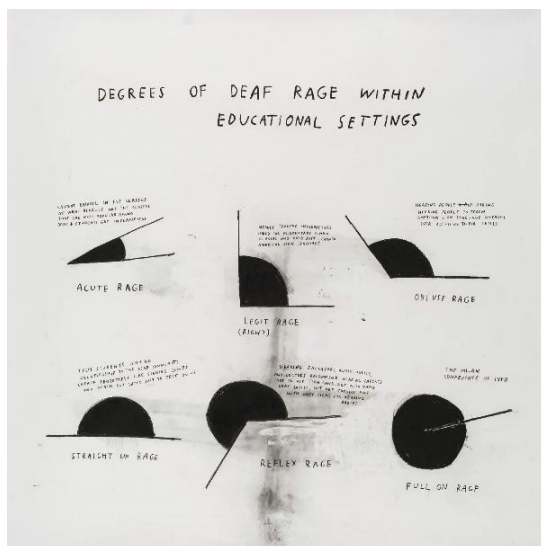
Christine Sun Kim, *"Game of Skill 2.0,"* 2015, *Velcro, magnets, custom electronics, intern's voice.*

Figure 3



Christine Sun Kim, "Degrees of Deaf Rage," 2018. Charcoal and oil pastel on paper.
<https://whitespace.cn/artists/christine-sun-kim/>

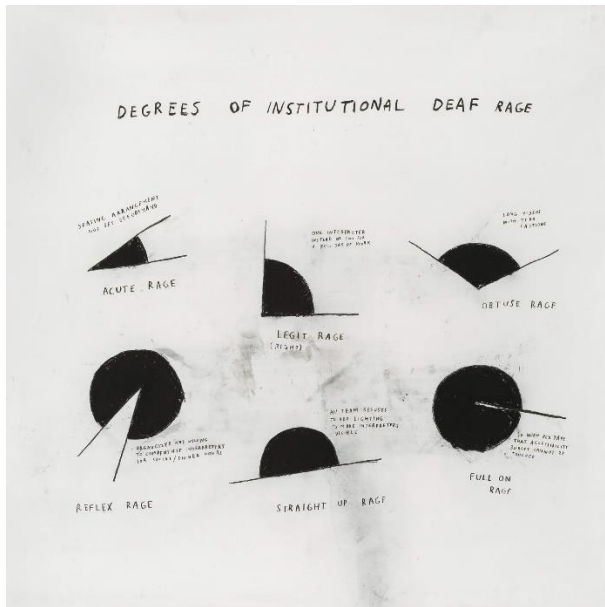
Figure 4



Christine Sun Kim, "Degrees of Deaf Rage Within Educational Settings," 2018. Charcoal on paper, 4 feet x 4 feet.

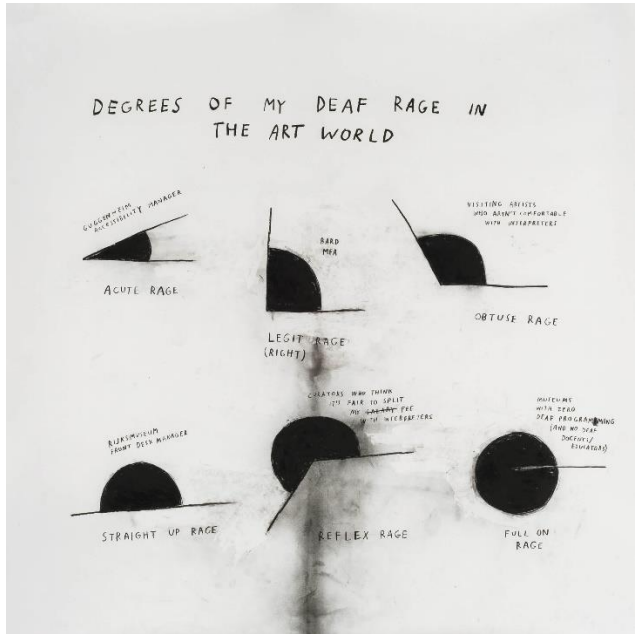
<https://ghebaly.com/work/christine-sun-kim/>

Figure 5



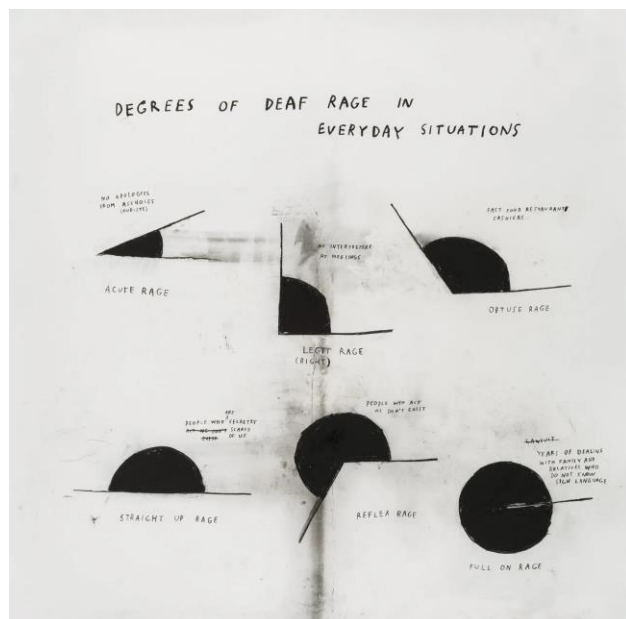
Christine Sun Kim, “Degrees of Institutional Deaf Rage,” 2018. Charcoal on paper, 4 feet x 4 feet. <https://ghealy.com/work/christine-sun-kim/>

Figure 6



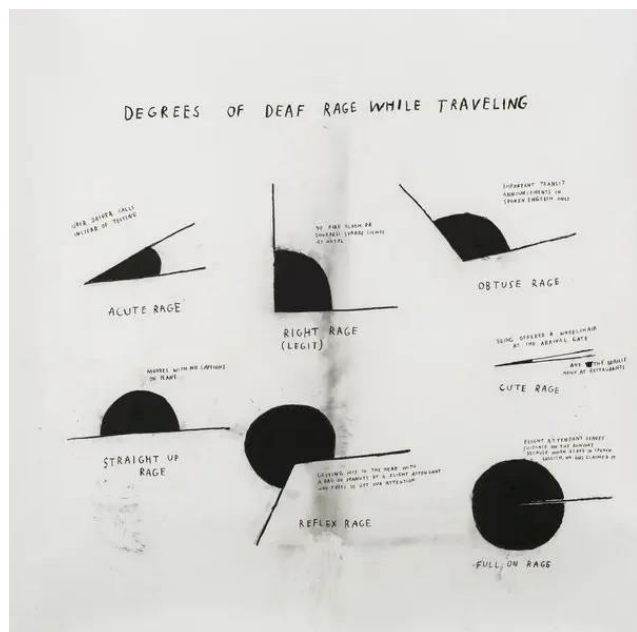
Christine Sun Kim, “Degrees of Deaf Rage in The Art World,” 2018, Charcoal on paper, 4 feet x 4 feet. <https://ghealy.com/work/christine-sun-kim/>

Figure 7



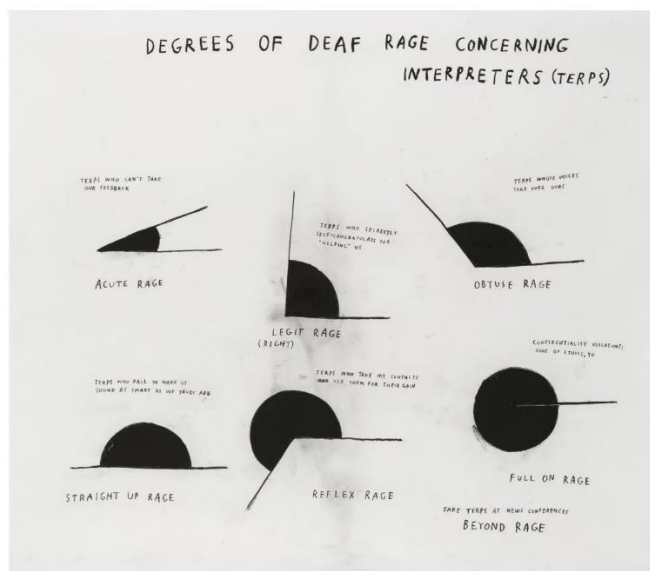
Christine Sun Kim, "Degrees of Deaf Rage in Everyday Situations," 2018, Charcoal on paper, 4 feet x 4 feet.

Figure 8



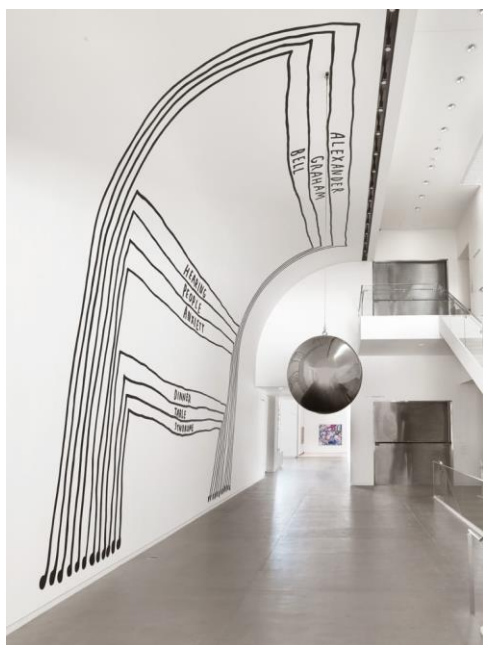
Christine Sun Kim, "Degrees of Deaf Rage While Traveling," 2018, Charcoal on paper, 4 feet x 4 feet.

Figure 9



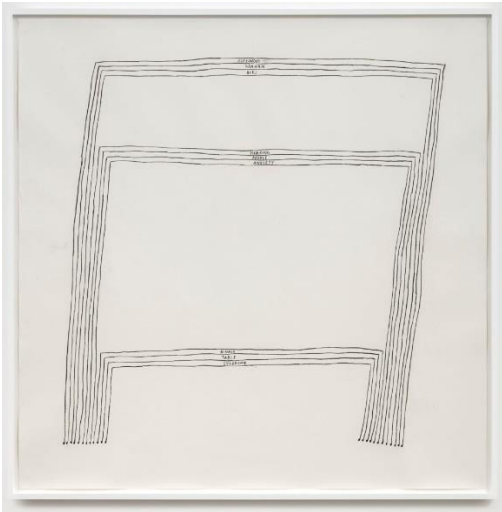
Christine Sun Kim, “Degrees of Deaf Rage Concerning Interpreters (Terps),” 2018, Charcoal on paper, 4 feet x 4 feet.

Figure 10



Christine Sun Kim, “Stacking Traumas,” 2020. <https://sites.wustl.edu/christinesunkim/items/viewing-room/>

Figure 11



Christine Sun Kim, "Three Tables III," 2020. Charcoal on paper. 5 feet x 5 feet <https://source.wustl.edu/2021/02/qa-with-christine-sun-kim/>

Figure 12



Christine Sun Kim, "Time Owes Me Rest Again," 2022, Mural. 40 feet high x 100 feet wide. Picture taken by author.

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