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Sound Artist Christine Sun Kim's Next Big Project Is 'a Love Letter' to American Sign Language

by TIFFANY HU



Christine Sun Kim's installation, "LAUTPLAN," at the Charles B. Wang Center at Stony Brook University. Kim recorded the sound of the church bells near her apartment in Germany and used recordings in the installation. Whenever the bells ring, the fans turn on, causing the bamboo stalks in the room to waver. 📷 Sharon Pak

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Growing up in a Korean community in California, sound artist Christine Sun Kim was taught to "tone things down" and not be so expressive at family gatherings.

That sentiment bled into her work. Even as an adult, it took her years to "unlearn" being so mindful of other peoples' feedback, she told NBC News. People would tell her that the sound in her projects were either too loud or bothering them or that it was good or bad. Kim recalled thinking, "but the sound you call bad, I actually like better."

"I didn't want that feedback. I wanted it to be something I could control and what was my version of those sounds."

At the start of her career, Kim said that people had totally different expectations for her, and some almost romanticized the idea of her being a sound artist.

"I get it: I'm Deaf, and I'm working with sound," Kim said through her American Sign Language interpreter Beth Staehle. "It's a bit crazy."


Kim said she's always identified as Deaf first.

"My Asian identity is second," she said. "Just because my language comes out in American Sign Language, so that identity is stronger. But of course, I have many identities."

For Kim, sound is both political and personal.

She currently splits her time between Berlin and New York and noted that while people in the U.S. were happy to create sound and noise with less concern of its effects on others, in other countries, people seemed to be more aware of how their actions affected their neighbors.



Christine Sun Kim  Sharon Pak

She recalled a time when she was giving a workshop at a Deaf theater space in Norway, where participants were playing with sound, when a Deaf person who wasn't participating in the workshop came into the space to express concern that they may be bothering neighbors.


"I understood that person's perspective," Kim said. "But at the same time, I was thinking to myself, 'wait, this is a Deaf theater space. I thought this would be the safe space, where we could play with sound,' but no, we still have to be concerned about neighbors."

These days, Kim said that she's learned to ask galleries and art institutes to let her work in the way that she chooses. A lot of her art is about her own thoughts and opinions, she said, and not about other peoples' responses.

One of Kim's latest sound installations, titled "LAUTPLAN," is currently on display at the Charles B. Wang Center at Stony Brook University. The installation is based on Kim's time in a railroad apartment in Berlin. There, she noticed that people would sporadically comment on the bell sounds coming from the church facing her apartment.

Each of the four bells rang at different intervals throughout the day, "infiltrating" her life and mind, she said.



A behind the scenes still from Christine Sun Kim's next project, a choreographed dance piece with the MIT Media Lab.  Tate Tullier

"I can see them, I start to think about them and their unpredictability aggravated me, so I took that and turned that into a new project," Kim said.

For the installation, she recorded the sound of church bells in Berlin and brought them to the church at Stony Brook, ringing according to the schedule in Berlin converted to Eastern time, allowing others to experience her own frustrating experiences.

“My Asian identity is second. Just because my language comes out in American Sign Language, so that identity is stronger. But of course, I have many identities.”

She said that she specifically asked her technician Levy Lorenzo not to give her any feedback on her recordings — even if they were distorted or weren't produced well.

"I didn't want that feedback," Kim said. "I wanted it to be something I could control and what was my version of those sounds."

She's also currently working with MIT Media Lab to create a dance video with choreographer Karole Armitage. It's a brand-new direction for Kim, and something she has always wanted to do: choreography and dance — using deaf people behind-the-scenes and on-camera, with real incorporation of sign language. She recently finished editing the video and plans to release it in the near future.

"I call it a love letter to the time-related grammar of American Sign Language," Kim said.

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