

# “Let’s Listen with Our Eyes . . . ” The Deconstruction of Deafness in Christine Sun Kim’s Sound Art

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**Abstract:** The academic discipline of Disability Studies investigates the cultural discourses and meanings around disability. Therefore, disability was introduced as a social category based on bodily variations but also as an identity issue. Since 2000, the so called ‘affirmative model of disability’ has started to gain momentum by drawing upon the spirit of the Disability Arts Movement and Disability Pride. It suggests that impairments are core parts of a person’s being and of their experience. This model challenges the underlying assumption that impairments are personal tragedies. It offers “essentially a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle and life experience of being impaired and disabled” (Swain and French 2000, p. 569). Such a perspective on disability is of course also represented in many contemporary artistic disciplines. In my article I will focus on selected works by the New York- and Berlin-based Sound Artist Christine Sun Kim. Using her own sonic experience, which is influenced by her deafness, Kim provokes the audience to question a one-dimensional mode of (auditory) perception by directing the attention on the visual, haptic, or conceptual perception of sound. Thus, Kim reveals deafness as a culturally defined impairment/disability: through her artistic practice Kim shifts her identity from non-hearing to differently hearing, not as a rejection of her deafness, but as an expression of her unique relationship to sound. Therefore, she deconstructs disability by exposing deafness as a positive identity category, which triggers and causes certain abilities.

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## 1. Introduction—Disability Rights Movement, Disability Identity and Disability Studies

Deafness and other impairments have been historically defined as disabilities by pathologizing clinical discourses and pejorative literary and social narratives (Mitchell and Snyder 2014) which can be summarized as audist or ableist<sup>1</sup>. However,

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Ableism’ is defined as discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities, ‘audism’ is defined as the discrimination against deaf and hard of hearing people.

in the past, being disabled was by no means an identity label and people with impairments did not identify as a minority group: “Throughout American history, disabled people have been more likely to identify themselves in terms of a specific group than as disabled” (Baynton 2008, p. 309). There was no need for them to create unity, but as Lennard J. Davis (Davis 2006, p. 232) points out, with the return of many impaired veterans from the Vietnam War (1955–1975), people with impairments started to fight together against their social oppression and for equality and their official status as members of an oppressed minority group. Thus, a civil rights movement for people with disabilities was formed gradually. However, like in other civil rights movements this first phase of unity seeking was replaced by discovering the diversity within the group, which led to conflict rather than unity. Conflicts grew out of questions like: Who is speaking for whom? Whose voices can be heard? Who can actually be part of the disability rights movement? Who has the right to speak?

Those questions have been especially crucial to deaf people and people with hearing impairments. Can deafness be labelled a disability? Or should deaf people be labelled as an ethnic group with specific social beliefs, behaviours, art, literary traditions, history and values? Or are they a linguistic minority, defined by using sign languages as their main mode of communication? According to Harlan Lane (Lane 2002) deaf people have to resist the label of disability, because first and most of all deafness is neither an impairment nor a disability. Secondly, deaf people do not have common interests with the disability rights movement:

The disability rights movement seeks independence for people with disabilities, Deaf people<sup>2</sup> do not have any concern with independent living than people in general [ . . . ]. Whereas people with disabilities seek total integration into society at large, Deaf people cherish their unique identity and seek integration that honors their distinct language and culture. (Lane 2002, p. 369)

However, within the rejection of the disability label lays a dilemma: Historically, deaf people were granted fundamental rights as citizens because of major legal improvements for disabled people. Additionally, at present, financial assistance from the state is often granted by registering as disabled (Lane 2002, pp. 374–375). According to Lennard J. Davis (Davis 2008, pp. 323–324), rejecting the disability label would actually be ableist, because it lies at the core of disability theory that people with disabilities are not disabled by their impairments but by society.

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Deaf’ (uppercase D) refers to people who identify as members of a linguistic and cultural minority, ‘deaf’ (lowercase d) refers to hearing loss as medical condition.

Another alternative option has been provided by Douglas C. Baynton (Baynton 2008), who stresses the need for solidarity among people who experience discrimination upon common (bodily) grounds:

Disabled people differ significantly from one another, but they share common experiences resisting the medicalization of their identity, coping with inferior 'special' education, fighting for autonomy and self-determination—in short, they share a common oppression, they have undertaken to forge a common liberation. (Baynton 2008, p. 309)

Baynton emphasizes not only to use the disability label but rather to declare disability as an identity category: "By claiming disability as an identity, however, disabled people name the oppression under which they live, declare solidarity with others similarly oppressed, and set themselves in opposition to it" (Baynton 2008, p. 296).

But how can 'disability identity' be defined? To answer that question, one has to deal with the definition of identities in general. According to the British sociologist Stuart Hall (Hall 1996),

[ . . . ] identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. (Hall 1996, p. 4)

Disability was articulated as a minority identity for the first time within the aforementioned disability rights movement. The struggle against discrimination shaped a community, "[ . . . ] galvanizing a diverse and diffuse population of disabled people helping to forge what many have come to understand as disability identity" (Rodas 2015, p. 103). The core of 'disability identity' is the 'social model of disability', a constructivist concept that defines disability as a social category that has been shaped by cultural and historical processes rather than being determined primarily by the body. The social model was the theoretical basis for forming a collective which was united through the shared experience of discrimination, or with Simi Linton's words:

We are all bound together, not by this list of our collective symptoms but by the social and political circumstances that have forged us as a group. We have found one another and found a voice to express not despair at our fate but outrage at our social positioning. (Linton 1998, p. 4)

In contrast to the medical model of disability, which conceives of disability solely as the result of physical or mental conditions, the social model in contrast

defines disability as the result of social prejudices and limited opportunities for participation (Shakespeare 2006). The theoretical key to the social model was the distinction between impairment and disability. Therefore, it was possible to link disability theoretically to other identity categories like ethnicity, gender or class that are understood as socially produced. Many scholars from humanities and social science disciplines began to focus on disability and disablement as—in the words of Joan Wallach Scotts (Scott 1986)—useful categories of historical and cultural analyses. As a result, the interdisciplinary academic discipline of Disability Studies was born.<sup>3</sup>

The formulation of the social model was crucial for the development of disability theory and therefore also for activism, but the model has also been challenged in recent years (Dewsbury et al. 2004).

Since 2000, the so-called 'affirmative model of disability' has started to gain momentum by drawing upon the spirit of the Disability Arts Movement and Disability Pride. The Disability Arts Movement grew out of the disability politics of the late 1970s, especially in the UK and USA. According to Masefield (2006), it is "art by disabled people for disabled people that speaks the truth about the disability experience" (Masefield 2006, p. 22). Most commonly, Disability Art is understood as an artistic practice which is inspired by the social model of disability and affirming the identities of disabled people:

Through song lyrics, poetry, writing, drama and so on, disabled people have celebrated difference and rejected the ideology of normality in which disabled people are devalued as 'abnormal'. They are creating images of strength and pride, the antithesis of dependency and helplessness. (Swain and French 2000, pp. 577–78)

Within the affirmative model, impairments are considered as core parts of a person's being and their experience. Therefore, this model challenges the underlying assumption that impairments are personal tragedies. It offers "essentially a non-tragic view of disability and impairment which encompasses positive social identities, both individual and collective, for disabled people grounded in the benefits of lifestyle and life experience of being impaired and disabled" (Swain and French 2000, p. 569). Against most common prejudices, being disabled "[...] may [...] enhance life or provide a lifestyle of equal satisfaction and worth" (Swain and French 2000, p. 570). For Swain and French, the affirmative model is foremost represented in contemporary literature by people with disabilities but still also in the Disability Arts Movement.

Those alternative views on disability have also been represented in contemporary artistic disciplines. As an example, works of the New York- and Berlin-based Sound

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<sup>3</sup> Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary academic discipline that examines the social, cultural and political dimensions of the concept of disability.

Artist Christine Sun Kim have been especially inspired by her deafness or rather her deaf auditory perception. But how is Christine Sun Kim's work inspired by her deafness and how is an alternative perspective on disability represented?

## **2. *Let's Listen with Our Eyes*—The Representation of Deafness as an Identity Category in Christine Sun Kim's Sound Art**

Originally a painter, Christine Sun Kim has been working in a variety of media ranging from installations and Sound Art to performance and drawings. After studying at the Rochester Institute of Technology, she graduated from the School of Visual Arts in New York and in 2013 she finished her Master's in Music and Sound at Bard College. During a trip to Berlin, Kim got in touch with Sound Art. Sound Art is an umbrella term for a variety of art forms, ranging from sound installations and sound sculptures to field recordings and soundscape compositions. Roughly speaking, Sound Art projects have in common that they utilize sound as their main means of expression or that they trigger an alternative listening perception (Wong 2012).

Being in a crisis because she had not yet found her artistic medium as a visual artist, Kim became curious in working with sound. She described her relationship with sound prior to her experience in Berlin as hierarchical: due to her deafness, she was raised believing that sound was not a part of her life. However, Kim noticed how important sound was for her surroundings by observing how people behave according to sound and how they respond to it. Slowly she discovered the rules of sound—the artist described them as 'sound etiquette'—which have been influencing her life as well:

People who have access to sound naturally own it and have a say in it. There were all these conventions for what was proper sound. They would tell me: Be quiet. Don't burp, don't drag your feet, make loud noises. I learned to be respectful of their sound. I saw sound as their possession. Now I'm reclaiming sound as my property. (Nowness 2011, min. 02:37–03:08)

In her TED Talk from 2015, Kim also emphasized the involvement of sound in power dynamics. Therefore, she defined sound also as social currency:

I realized: sound is like money, power, control—social currency. In the back of my mind, I've always felt that sound was your thing, a hearing person's thing. And sound is so powerful that it could either disempower me and my artwork, or it could empower me. I chose to be empowered. (Kim 2015, min. 04:56–06:00)

Since then, Christine Sun Kim has been empowered and she has reclaimed sound as her property by exploring its materiality in a variety of media. That means

for example that she makes sound perceivable in various forms, may it be visually, physically or conceptually. The central thread of her entire artistic practice is its inspiration, namely Kim's personal auditory perception, which is caused by her deafness. Thus, Christine Sun Kim pleads for a multidimensional perception of sound, which is not primarily dependent on hearing: "Let's listen with our Eyes and not just our Ears", so the artist, "let's look at the bigger picture" (Nowness 2011, min. 07:56–08:08).

It is by no means something new that the perception of sound is multidimensional, especially not in Sound Art. Though it is striking that just because of a lack of one sense, namely the hearing sense, it is commonly assumed that sound and music play no role in the lives of deaf people. It is common knowledge that the perception of sound is deeply social. The communication theorists Tom Humphries and Carol Padden (Padden and Humphries 1988) remind us that "in any discussion of Deaf people's knowledge of sound, it is important to keep in mind that perception of sound is not automatic or straightforward, but is shaped through learned, culturally defined practices" (Padden and Humphries 1988, p. 93).

Kim discusses these 'culturally defined practices' with her artistic practice by shifting the focus from a one- to a multi-dimensional auditory perception, which does not depend solely on an intact hearing sense. She directs her audience's attention on the visual, haptic or conceptual perception of sound. For example, in *Speaker Drawings* (2012) she placed paint-dipped brushes on top of subwoofers covered in paper. Kim then projected her voice to make the subwoofers vibrate, which caused the items to move around the paper, creating imprints, a visualization of her voice. In *Piano Wires and Transducers* (2013) however, Kim focused on the haptic qualities of sound. The name speaks for itself—in this performance she vocalized through a set of piano wires what made the audience actually feel Kim's voice.

Another example is Kim's installation *Calibration Room* which was hosted by the University of Texas in 2015. Entering the installation, visitors heard a variety of prior recorded sounds (e.g., walking in sand). Those sounds were played back, adjusted to each participant's individual listening spectrum. A technician outside the room was responsible for setting the right decibel level. For Kim, it was important that the installation was accessible to people who can hear sounds at a variety of levels: "Each individual's hearing level is very personal. It's just like vision; everyone's vision is different, and everyone requires a different prescription if they have glasses. It's the same thing with our ability to hear" (Cantrell 2015). In *Calibration Room*, hearing then became an individual ability, independent from a normative hearing scale: "The concept is that no matter what your decibel level is, you won't miss anything in that space. In that space, I'm not considered deaf. I'm accessing all the sound" (Cantrell 2015). So, in Kim's case the recordings were played back in very low frequencies in order to be perceptible. As a result, the distinction between hearing

and non-hearing was, technically speaking, dissolved. Therefore, deafness was no longer considered a disability, but just one possible aspect of human diversity.

These examples show that Kim not only triggers an alternative perception of sound, but that she also does not interpret her deafness as an impairment or a disability: she performs an identity shift, from 'non-hearing' to 'differently hearing'; therefore, she exposes her culturally defined impairment—her deafness—not as a disability. Kim's works reflect that deafness is not a deficit, but that it rather causes certain abilities. Thus, she breaks stereotypes and therefore causes a reevaluation of deafness as a positive identity category (Benedikt 2017, pp. 163–64).

Christine Sun Kim's personal experiences with communication between the deaf and the non-deaf worlds are also reflected in her artistic practice. For example in the playbill for *Subjective Loudness* (Woof Media 2013), where Kim asked her audience to recite words into microphones that sounded through 200 speakers, she wrote "as part of my practice, I will depend on audience participation as my platform, instead of using the actual stage" (Woof Media<sup>1</sup> n.d.). Because Kim's main mode of communication is American Sign Language (ASL), she often collaborates with others (e.g., interpreters or audience members) to express her voice and her ideas in spoken language:

Others become like an extension of my identity [ . . . ] my voice doesn't really exist without someone or something supplementing it [ . . . ] I am beginning to see that the more I collaborate with audiences and artists, the more sonorous my voice gets. (Mansfield 2015)

As an example, in *Game of Skill 2.0*, an installation which was constructed in 2015 in New York, the audience was invited to listen to a text about the future of New York which was written by Kim and voiced by another person. The text became audible by holding up a custom-built device against Velcro strips, which led through the gallery where the installation took place. If the antenna of the device was held appropriately against the Velcro, it would have emitted sound which was relative to the participant's movement. Therefore, each person had to discover for themselves which speed of movement was adequate to achieve comprehension. Kim explains that this exertion of a special effort should "make explicit the particular form of labor involved in listening, which is often regarded as a passive activity" (Woof Media<sup>2</sup> n.d.). Referring to the social model of disability, another aspect of *Game of Skill 2.0* was to point out that hearing is an individual ability which is not dependent on normative scales. The artist explained "It shows that everyone hears at various levels, like different small amounts of deafness. But they all need to learn how to walk and hold up a device in a particular way to hear full sentences; they function like human turntable needles. It takes practice" (Wilk 2015).

When Kim raises that ‘collaborative voice’ through audience participation or technical devices, for example, it can be described as an act of self-empowerment and an instance of interdependence rather than dependence:

I became interested in guiding people to become my voice. Others become like an extension of my identity. If they vocalize the way I envision [...] I can almost feel my presence being audibly recognized. My voice doesn’t really exist without someone or something supplementing it. (Mansfield 2015)

Living in a society oriented towards speech and hearing, Kim’s ‘voice’ as a person who speaks a signed language is not audible. As Tom Humphries (Humphries 1996) states, “a self cannot exist if it is not heard. Deaf people have had to create voices, learn to hear their own voices, and now it remains to compel others to listen” (Humphries 1996, p. 105). The author, feminist, and social activist bell hooks (hooks 1989) describes how especially important an audible voice for members of minority groups is to become independent and autonomous individuals. In a speech-centred society like ours, one can primarily be heard when an audible voice can be raised. Christine Sun Kim compels others to listen through her artistic practice with sound, which can therefore be described as an organ of speech: “For many years as an artist, I really struggled to find my voice. Yet ironically enough, I found it in sound. This is not some political statement, but an amazing personal and complex trajectory” (Lincoln Motor Co. 2014, min. 1:10–1:38).

Through her artistic projects Kim finally creates what she calls her ‘sonic identity’: “Art gives my voice a far greater significance [...] I feel my voice flow out. This confirms its existence and therefore my own” (Krolczyk 2013).

### **3. Conclusion**

Christine Sun Kim’s aforementioned works can be described as highly self-referential by dealing with the multidimensionality of (auditory) perception on the one hand and on the other hand, communication errors, the supremacy of spoken languages and speechlessness forced by society. As a result, the audience is either actively or passively provoked to question normative modes of perception and/or communication. Although Kim speaks out for her deafness as influencing her artistic practice, she accentuates it as only one layer of her identity:

My deafness has clearly contributed to and influenced my work, but so have many other factors such as my upbringing, family, communication and interests. Ideally, there would be no adjectives preceding the identity ‘artist.’ After all, ‘deafness’ and ‘disability’ are words that carry a certain stigma. But on the other hand, these terms can be helpful and acknowledge the elephant in the room—giving the audience a chance to get past this



superficial layer of my identity. So maybe I shouldn't be averse to such words, and just let things be—I believe my work is strong enough to stand on its own. (Hyung Lee 2013)

Nevertheless, Christine Sun Kim performs an identity change from 'non-hearing' to 'differently-hearing' by highlighting her own multi-sensory sound perception which is actually influenced by her deafness.

The artist's works so far have been practical implementations of the alternative models of disability and their focus on societal barriers and disability pride. Her artistic practice is highlighting the abilities that go along with deafness—a commonly supposed impairment/disability. By counteracting the common deficit-oriented definition of deafness she also works against social conventions and normative guidelines by breaking stereotypes, because who is finally expecting a deaf person to be a Sound Artist?

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