AHL Foundation

Archive of Korean Artists in America (AKAA) Interview

- Interviewee: Christine Sun Kim
- Interviewer: Taeyoon Choi
- Interpreter: Denise Kahler
- January 14, 2020 / via Zoom Meeting
- Recorded and Transcribed by Soojung Hyun (AKAA Research Fellow 2019-2020)
- 1 Video file
- This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity
- Open for research use

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Taeyoon Choi (TC): I'm Taeyoon and I'm a fan of Christine, collaborator, and longtime friend. I'm very excited to have this opportunity to talk with her about her recent work. Even though we talk regularly, it's been a minute since we've had a serious conversation about art.

Christine Sun Kim (CSK) (interpreted by Denise): Hi, my name is Christine Sun Kim. I'm an American artist currently living in Berlin. Right now, we're communicating in American sign language through a sign language interpreter, Denise.

Denise Kahler: (My name is Denise, I'm a sign language interpreter for this meeting this morning. I've known Christine for about 15 years. So we have both worked together for 15 years and we're friends, too.)

TC: Also, Denise has interpreted for me quite a lot of times with Christine and also other members of the Deaf community. So, I want to have that on the record that we are not strangers. There might be a lot of things that we talk about that are between the lines that we may need to unpack for the readers.

TC: I want to start with one of the first questions, and please correct me if this is wrong. In recent years, maybe in the last two years, it seems like you're more comfortable making political statements about Deaf culture or disability rights in your art. I remember maybe five, six years ago, you were actively trying to distance yourself from your disability, because that was the only thing that people wanted to talk about. So am I seeing it right that you feel more comfortable with your art and actually making a statement in a way that you want about Deaf culture?

CSK: I remember that conversation clearly, and yes, I've asked myself that question. My work, my practice, I feel has maybe taken a shift over the years. About 10 years ago, the audience might not have been ready for me or maybe I wasn't ready to take the risk. So, like you said, I was trying to distance myself from disability and Deaf culture and about 10 years ago I was not thinking about what disability means. Deaf people have a long history, but the community often isn't included in what's going on in society. I think this is because of linguistics. Deaf people communicate with a different language and often you go to events and there are no sign language interpreters.

CSK: So those [Deaf people] kind of feel like it's sparked resistance. And the word disability itself – that word is finally starting to grow and expand and change and become a more positive term. I've spoken with other individuals and if I could do away

with or push aside that disability or don't recognize it at all... I remember telling you that, and I think maybe you said that to me… you mentioned it seems like I was a little bit anti-Deaf or anti-disability. And I think at the beginning of my career, that's what I needed to do to establish myself as a new emerging artist. Then, when I felt there was a safe space, I could go in that direction and be more comfortable sharing my Deaf experience.

TC: Well, I think that's a great point and I think you are aware, and also part of a larger cultural shift with disabilities and Deafness becoming more positive, more fashionable, more progressive. I think we didn't have Nyle DiMarco and Chella Man 10 years ago. We didn't have all of these people who are in the mainstream defining disability as an identity. And I see your work as a big part of that, at least from a New York arts and culture, fashion perspective. You have been pushing that and let's just acknowledge that things are different now compared to 10 years ago when we first met and I want to give you some credit for that.

TC: My question is, what will the next 10 years be like for all of us in the community, around the community, allies? Can we just brainstorm what the next 10 years would be like? What do you want to see in the world?

CSK: Okay, well before I answer that question, I just want to mention one thing about disabled artists in general, and why I feel they're pushing addressing disability, or there's more resistance to addressing disability, or feel a stronger connection politically right now". Because in so many different countries I've seen, each country has their own set of laws and rules on how they provide access and quality of life and enjoyment as well as education. So it can be quite different depending on where you are. I think being a disabled person in America is probably the best place to be, because of how disability laws are enforced.

CSK: I have met others who have gone through life and had greatly different experiences than I have, and I traveled to other countries and I can see people's frustration. Deaf people aren't allowed to have a driver's license or they can't get a job or participate in basic parts of life. I've also seen our rights being pushed and being more progressive, not only in America but globally. Anywhere Deaf culture may exist or in history where Deaf culture may exist, I'm starting to be a big believer that if we change laws, slowly over time, that will affect people's thinking. Not only just to provide access, not for people to feel, 'oh, I have been forced to do this', but I can see the attitude towards our work in the United States differently as opposed to Europe or Asia,

where laws around disability may be less progressive. And I think seeing those differences has had a big influence on my practice of late.

CSK: And your other question about 10 years in the future - maybe it's good for me to mention that I was just a co-curator for the first time in Tallinn for an exhibition with a friend of mine. The two of us co-curated this exhibition and it was interesting because it was not easy to make choices about which artists we were going to exhibit. Disability—I may know a little bit about each, but I don't have experience or knowledge of all disabilities. In Estonia, it seems they're ready to ask, 'What is the disability to us? What does this mean for us?' That attitude seems to be growing not just there but elsewhere too, so that helped me see a different perspective as a curator and as an artist. And it's interesting going through the list of artists—there were so many Americans on the list and we struggled to find non-American artists to be a part of it. I felt that was a reflection of the law. In the United States, the laws around disability are there to protect individuals, so individuals [from the United States] may be a little bit more well established than artists in other countries who don't have those laws. We showed this in the exhibition, and I think you'll see this happening in many other exhibitions as well. I feel the next 10 years should be interesting in a positive way; it really depends on how technology affects us. Technology can make everything so one-size fits all. If that sort of technology continues to be manifold and flexible for different people and not just one specific group of people, then I can see how that would really affect us. The adaptability of tech is what will affect us.

TC: I want to make a brief comment on the Americentric nature in the academic and arts about disability culture. I'm going to Canada next week for a disability arts conference and you're right, 70% of the presenters are either New York-based or Berkeley-based. There's a little bit of a centralization of this trend, which is something that we should acknowledge and be aware of, because it's still an East and West coast liberal idea about identity and equity. And I think what you're saying about different cultures having a completely different set of standards and needs is real.

TC: I think about the Korean experience, because I still continue talking with all these disability artists in Korea, and their needs are just entirely different. They need a different sense of job security. They need different kinds of access and I cannot discredit it. I think sign language is a good example.

TC: A lot of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing people don't use sign language in Korea to this day. There's a cultural reason for that, especially the need to assimilate or fit into

the box is quite strong in countries like Korea. So they react differently to issues of access and inclusion. There is still yet to be a major Deaf or blind actor in Korea. There are wonderful artists and writers, but they are still quite marginalized. So I'm thinking that the mainstream shifts and then the DIY shift needs to happen at the same time. And what I like about your practice is it's bridging the two sometimes.

TC: Your art practice can be very obscure, very critical, or layered. And some of the stuff that you do in fashion or your collaboration with others—or I'm not sure if it's a collaboration—but your association with pop culture seems to be making a different kind of impact. So it's two layers at the same time and that seems pretty healthy to have both.

TC: There are many layers of Christine's practice. I think there's definitely her personality—she's very outgoing and comfortable in public. When she's performing or doing a fashion shoot, for example. And I think that's awesome. I just think that artists should not stay in the studio. Artists should be everywhere, going to conferences and going to fashion shows.I know Christine creates her drawings or writings, which are very personal and she does it all by herself and that's just entirely her. And then that coexists with more of a pop culture or a mainstream version of herself. So it happens at the same time.

CSK: I am always wondering about the gaps between the languages of cultures, between platforms. At first, I was thinking that I need to have this specific platform as an artist. That's strictly where I was going to be, but my art kept pulling me in other directions; collaborating with or working with the disabled community, with the media, like you said, working with photography, being photographed.

CSK: So earlier in my career I really wanted to stay specifically in the art world, but now, I want to stay in my current direction of being able to move across multiple platforms. I've often worked with different sign language interpreters and I never really feel like I fit in one exact community, so moving across platforms becomes a reflection of my practice, kind of like you said, there are two different directions or layers there. In regards to code switching, I'm really good at it with hearing and Deaf people, switching between different cultures, but I do find it exhausting. People become more and more conscious or aware of how others do that kind of code switching, but hopefully somewhere down the line in the future, I will have to do that less and people will allow us to be what we are.

TC: Let's talk a little bit about your private practice of drawing and writing. This practice takes place in your private studio and that seems to be one area that is not touched by mass culture or collaboration. You are really defining the style of the drawing. The works are becoming stronger. Some of them became big billboards that covered up highways or buildings. It's just been so interesting to see your scribbles become really large and travel to different physical spaces and media spaces. So tell us a little bit more about your writing and drawing practices and if they have changed or if you're keeping them consistent in some way.

CSK: Well, in the past my writing was more integrated with playing with the idea of linguistics, with ASL, or with musical notation. I started playing around with those ideas and I thought there were a lot of similarities between ASL and musical notation and that kind of led me in the direction of collaboration and thinking about American sign language. My mural “If sign language were considered equal, we would already be friends”, for London Art Night 2019, is one piece where I collaborated with a group of children and I asked them, what would you like to say? What do you want to say to the world? Their answers are what influenced that piece.

CSK: I'm sorry, I feel I'm kind of not really answering your question. I guess I think about a concept first and when I have a clear concept in mind then I kind of know what medium or format I want to use. Should I do this as a small drawing? Should I make this large scale? I usually always do a series—one idea or one question, one situation, one specific experience, but I feel like there's never one answer, so it’s usually a series. There are multiple answers to any question. I do that, and usually in even numbers because I like to do things in grids. I feel grids work best in even numbers. If you just have an odd number and one piece is kind of sticking off to the side, I feel it just doesn't work.

TC: Can I interrupt for a second? I think that's a good point about you. You really like chaos and play. You just like to mess things up or be really free, but on the other hand you're extremely systematic. You're so organized in your own way. And you used to be a digital archivist, managing thousands of files. So I think that's really interesting, because while the drawings are very improvised or very gestural, there's something consistent and I think that really works with the pie charts that were really widely circulated last year. And some of the staff drawings, the line drawings, are very repetitive. So I think that's just interesting about your practice—that it's irregular and unpredictable, but still very controlled. There's that tension between extreme control and you letting go of the control.

CSK: Yes. And I think playing between those two things, like you said, the graph kind of design or the grid design as an undergraduate, really changed my life. One class, Oh—FCP, there's an application that they had and it was in its first version (1.0!). It's an application that you can use to edit videos.

TC: What is FCP?

CSK: Final Cut Pro.

TC: Oh, okay. Yeah. That's a video editing software. Yeah.

CSK: Yes, exactly. 1.0, that version, the first one they put out. I remember using that and learning the basic tools of it in the graphic design class that I took, and I thought, like, ‘Oh, I don't really like those grid designs so much and all the planning that went into it,’ and I felt I couldn't handle it. Years later it kind of came up in my work again and I was like, ‘Whoa. Now I can see how it helps me place things.’ That program, which helped me take that class years ago, I think became the foundation of my practice today. I think that sometimes you have things move too fast and then mentally you kind of ask yourself, what choices do I need to make? When things are laid out clearly in a grid, I feel like, okay, I feel better now.

TC: Yeah. I think you're a bit of a control freak.

CSK: Yeah. I wasn't before, but I am now. I feel as an artist you have to be. You have to document. You have to save. You have to archive. Otherwise, your projects are just lost. And then all that work, where did it go?

TC: I know. I'm really struggling with that because I'm also a little bit meticulous in one way but also really erratic and kind of not organized. And it's hard because things just pile up and we also don't know what is valuable until many years later. We may make a silly drawing that becomes one thing that people want to see, but I just didn't take it seriously. Just one more thing on the drawing is that I think there's definitely a sense of humor and comic in your drawings. I know that you really like the Simpsons and 90's cartoon and comic culture. What are the kinds of visual motifs that inspire you these days? Is there something new in the younger generation that you find kind of interesting visually?

CSK: Well, I read a lot of Twitter and I read a lot of different articles, but not so many books lately. I'd like to go back to reading books, but in this day and age I watch a lot of different TV shows as well. Since I was pregnant I was kind of laid up, so I was doing a lot of that. Mooching off my friend, kind of hacker movies. I'm able to binge watch these things and so movies and that kind of culture influenced me. That's why I don't read books.

TC: I want to jump into another question. I think this may be relevant to the archive because it's a Korean American artist archive. I've been thinking a lot about my Korean identity, especially the South Korean diaspora and my connections with East Asia, because I was in Hong Kong as you know. And China is a really important and very problematic country that we are all associated with somehow. I think China is quite similar to the US in a sense. It's huge and there are a lot of progressive things happening, but also very oppressive things happening as well.

TC: So I just see that as an interrelated situation. And for us being of East Asian ancestry, I have been thinking a lot about South Korea, North Korea, and that region. Many years ago, we had a small collaboration where I helped you translate a letter from a North Korean, a kind of a family reunion planning. It's been quite a few years and I know that your family is in LA and their extended family and they are still healthy and you still have connections with your grandmother. I'm just wondering, have you thought about North Korea, South Korea and the region, and the whole of East Asia? Because you also have a gallery in China so your work travels there.

CSK: That was set up by a TED fellow whom I was friends with and they asked me if I could make some kind of contribution. Christmas wasn't really a good time for me, just this past holiday visiting my family. I think it was a communication thing. I just found myself feeling fed up all over again and I guess I'm a little bit fortunate that I'm able to kind of communicate with my cousins and just kind of be wild and free or texting or whatever. I know there's a lot of communication issues in many families, but for me, to have the added layer of the Deafness there and trying to balance the Korean culture and communication… Sometimes people are not very approachable. So Christmas made me think a lot about my Korean identity and my Grandma. She's 95... How old is she? 95 now, I think. Well, she's in her 90's and she's getting old, but her mind is still sharp.

CSK: Of all my grandparents, she's the only one left living. Sometimes we'll write back and forth. She'll tell stories about her childhood and her experience during the Japanese

colonial period. I think that right now, I'm feeling – because of Hollywood becoming so mainstream—What was that movie? Crazy Rich Asians, that movie, right?—and putting out Asian culture, you start to see it more and more these days. I see it building more of an appearance and there's a small group, a collective in LA, it's called GYOPO.

TC: It's called Gyopo. That's a word for foreign Koreans.

CSK: It's an amazing organization. They have a really good program and I gave a talk there last year and I really enjoyed it. They're not very strict. They're open to ideas and I can see a big shift happening there regarding identity and roots.

TC: Yeah. I mean I think it's interesting for you to bring them up because I think they are a bit different from the earlier generation of Korean American activists. My understanding of the 90s and early 2000s Asian American activism was that they were very insular and a bit about, let's find our roots, connect with where we came from, type of a thing and very exclusionary. Whereas, Gyopo seems to be interested in intersectionality. For example, mixed race Koreans or queer Koreans, and I think it seems less nationalistic compared to the old school Korean American activism. I mean I used to just feel so suffocated by meeting…

CSK: More accepting of mixed race people.

TC: Yes. Right. Because I used to feel like the Korean Americans in LA are more conservative than Koreans in Korea because they left in the seventies or eighties and they just stuck with that mindset. So they speak like old people. They're super patriarchal and sexist and, sorry, I'm just going off, but I really feel they're stuck in 1970's dictatorship model and they're super Christian. They're voting for Trump and I just, it just pains me to interact with them.

TC: I mean our parents' generation for sure, but even our generation, people who grew up in that environment could be like that, they would be really stuck in the past. And that happens a lot with immigrant families because they are isolated once they come here and they just stick with their own kind of socioeconomic class. However, I think what we are talking about is a more queer friendly, more mixed race friendly idea of a national ethnic—it's not nationalism, it's ethnic identity.

CSK: Also, that could include people with disabilities because the Korean culture is huge, when you think about that, the way they are towards disability. The disability

rights they have over there, it's – oh my gosh. I struggled with that aspect of Korean culture for a while. But now, I see this new Korean American generation and I see the changes it is bringing. Gyopo, like you said, is part of this change. There's also another group in LA, by the name of Commonwealth and Council. The community is growing and expanding too.

TC: Yeah, that's correct. Yeah. And there's a huge LA Korean American art scene that's really cool and one artist that I like is Gala Porras-Kim. She's part of the Commonwealth and Council Gallery. She's half Colombian, half Korean. And her work about language and migration and borders—artificial and real borders—is really interesting. I don't think the east coast has that kind of Korean American culture yet. However, there's a really good Pan-Asian food and music community happening right now. There's a thing called a Happy Family Night Market and they're a group of people, mostly women, that organize a food and art festival and they've been really, really good. I worked with them a few times and they're all into subverting that ethnic identity. So it's not just about, 'Oh, we got to make the best Vietnamese sandwich.' It's, 'how can you make a Korean Vietnamese sandwich?' And it makes complete sense, because oftentimes people are mixed. Sometimes they would mix Latin American cuisine because people who make Korean food in the restaurants are all from Latin America. So it must have an influence on how we have food.

CSK: I think that's interesting. Immigrant life in the 80's and the 90's as people came to the country and tried to remember their roots was different, people were trying to make a perfect copy of where they came from—have an authentic experience. As things have gone, things have changed, and so many other people are coming. You can see that happening.

CSK: But now, I think compared to the late 90s and 2000s, we're seeing much more change and I think that's good. Let the change happen. I think we're more and more open than they were in the eighties and the nineties. We're working hard to find a place, to find faith, to find a language and culture and when people can find their place, I think that's when change starts to happen.

TC: Okay, so I want to ask one last question. Are you planning to make any performance or digital media work in the future?

CSK: What do you mean by digital media?

TC: Something that involves computers or interactive sound work?

CSK: What's going on next for me? My next work is at MIT, at the visual art section that they have there. I have 12 new drawings that will be shown there. They're the ones that I made regarding sound last year and the ones that I made for Roux, Seven Days of Lullabies (2018). There's one for each day of the week. I did this for parents, for their idea of singing lullabies; that will also become part of a sound installation there. I also have a few talks coming up. I'm not good at remembering my schedule.

TC: So in the MIT exhibition, there will be a sound installation and will there be a performance as well?

CSK: No performance. But there will be sound, yes.

TC: Let me clarify the intention for asking that, because you have done a lot of work with sound and technology in the past and that's a big aspect of your practice. I want to hear where you're at with it, what ideas you have or what kind of technologies you're excited about.

CSK: Well right now the technology part is really too much work for me and I'm always screwing it up. To make things, then the debris, to be able to take care of it and maintain it. Remember that piece that I did, Game of Skill? It was two huge cases that needed to be brought and I have no patience for that. I'm really not good at it. I could collaborate with somebody who has that skill, but I found those kinds of projects really exhausting. I worked with Levy Lorenzo before when I did Game of Skill, but it was a lot to keep up with. I kind of just make something and move on. It's a challenge to make things in the technology world and to keep it relevant.

SH: Thank you. So I would like to get a kind of closing comment for this interview. Korean American artists started to come to the United States in the 50s and 60s, and then slowly, they grew in the 80s and 90s, but throughout this time, the important part are the identity issues of Korean American artists in the 1990s. In that era, artists of multicultural backgrounds began to enter the mainstream art world. One Korean American artist is Yong Soon Min. Why I mention her name is that she’s not only a visual artist but also an activist, curator, and educator. I expected that artists are a kind of social messenger that reveal issues or problems to the public and share meaningful things in their lives. So Taeyoon and Christine, you’re a part of the younger generation,

who I expect will lead the next generation of Korean American artists. What do you think is your role as an artist in society?

CSK: There are two different perspectives. It depends on what kind of practice. For example, in my practice, I feel responsible for reaching specific communities and finding their place in history. The work I make to expand on the idea of Deafness, Deaf identity and the Deaf experience and then put out into society to make people more aware I think is helpful. The more work I make, the more I archive things. Secondly, I like how many artists often challenge what the idea of the future means. They may offer different possibilities for the future. What kind of future do we want? I feel artists often help society see a big picture. I think those are the two main takeaways for me.

TC: I just want to add that the idea of a Korean American or international Koreans or Korean diasporas is changing. Because you've mentioned Korean American artists being separate from Korean artists. For example, Lee Bul is a Korean artist and Hak Kyung Cha is a Korean American artist. I think that line is becoming really blurred these days and less strictly divided. So for example, I think, I identify as both. I'm Korean American but I'm also Korean. I studied there, I use the language and my work isn't explicitly about being Korean American.

* In the use of the capitalization of Deaf we follow Christine Sun Kim, who is referring to Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture (1988), where they write: “We use the lowercase deaf when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing, and the uppercase Deaf when referring to a particular group of Deaf people who share a language – American Sign Language (ASL) – and a culture.”