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A Map of a Sound as a Space: Christine Sun Kim's *(LISTEN)* (2016)

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"Meet at 14th Street and Avenue C, 1:00 PM (rain or shine)." The instructions were provided by email and social media, announcing an upcoming participatory public artwork by artist Christine Sun Kim (*(LISTEN)*).[31] Over two days in October 2016, two dozen people followed the call to coalesce on a nondescript intersection at the edge of Lower Manhattan near the East River. Behind a bright blue gate loomed a Con Edison powerplant, which provides continuous electricity to the city's five boroughs, omitting a soft static buzz. Kim greeted those who had gathered that warm and breezy day with an inviting wave: "It's good to see everyone," she signed in American Sign Language (ASL), transposed to spoken-English through an ASL interpreter: "We're going to do a little bit of walking."

Kim detailed her close connection to both the intersection and neighborhood. Though Con Edison was not the source of the infamous Northeast Blackout in 2003, its building reminded the artist of her experience of the event, during which she was forced to navigate the city in near-total darkness by foot. The building functioned as an architectural mnemonic device that triggered a vital memory of Kim's life in the city, sparking a multisensory

[31] *(LISTEN)* was organized by Charles Eppley with Sam Hart and Kerry Santullo through Avant.org, a distributed platform for contemporary art and research.

experience of time and space. Kim created vivid mental images of her journey for the group, which included a mixture of Deaf, Hard of Hearing (HoH), and hearing people, complementing her story with descriptive textual captions displayed on an iPad (see figs. 1–3). As she explained, during her walk she encountered bars giving away free beer that could not be kept cool. Emergency vehicles cascaded spinning light across the deadened cityscape, illuminating its walls with a fragmented splash. Like others, Kim felt growing bodily discomfort as the temperature swelled in a thick August heat, tempered in part by a chilled and fragrant ale.

Fig. 1. Christine Sun Kim near the Con Edison plant during *(LISTEN)*. Reproduced by permission of Charles Eppley.

Fig. 2. Kim in front of Suen Dragon community garden during *(LISTEN)*. Reproduced by permission of Charles Eppley.

Fig. 3. Kim leading participants through the streets during *(LISTEN)*. Reproduced by permission of Charles Eppley.

Many Deaf and HoH people use captions to access information provided in spoken language (e.g., English) as well as musical and environmental sounds. Captions aim to provide complete, literal descriptions of any verbal or acoustical communication perceived by a hearing person in the same situation. In the absence of captioning, Deaf and HoH people are denied access to crucial information available to others. But captions are not always comprehensive and in practice are often undermined by missing speech or vague language (e.g., "tense music") that does not contain the multisensory and emotional nuance otherwise felt by hearing persons. As Kim describes in her article "The Sound of Non-Sounds," conventional captioning often fails to appreciate that "listening is an experience involving more than sound, [including] a variety of different sensory and emotional responses beyond sonic properties." While Kim's recounting of the 2003 blackout—one of many personal memories shared in *(LISTEN)*—was intensified through her use of poetic captions, these texts did not simply illustrate her narrative: the phrases intervened in captioning principles, in part by adopting poetic prose and by embracing multisensory perspectives that disregarded objective description, including "(the sound of darkness manifesting itself)" and "(the sound of temperature rising)" (see fig. 4).

As a young person, Kim was "taught to believe" that sound was "not a part of her life," as she explained in her 2015 Ted Talk "The Enchanting Music of Sign Language." Yet deafness contains a spectrum of acoustical and sonic experience, spanning those who *hear some* to those who *do not hear*, and those who have always been Deaf to those who experience gradual or sudden hearing loss. Regardless of one's individual cochlear ability, Deaf and HoH people experience sound both physiologically and socio-culturally, including physical vibrations and through the biased cultural values (and resulting barriers) that define and

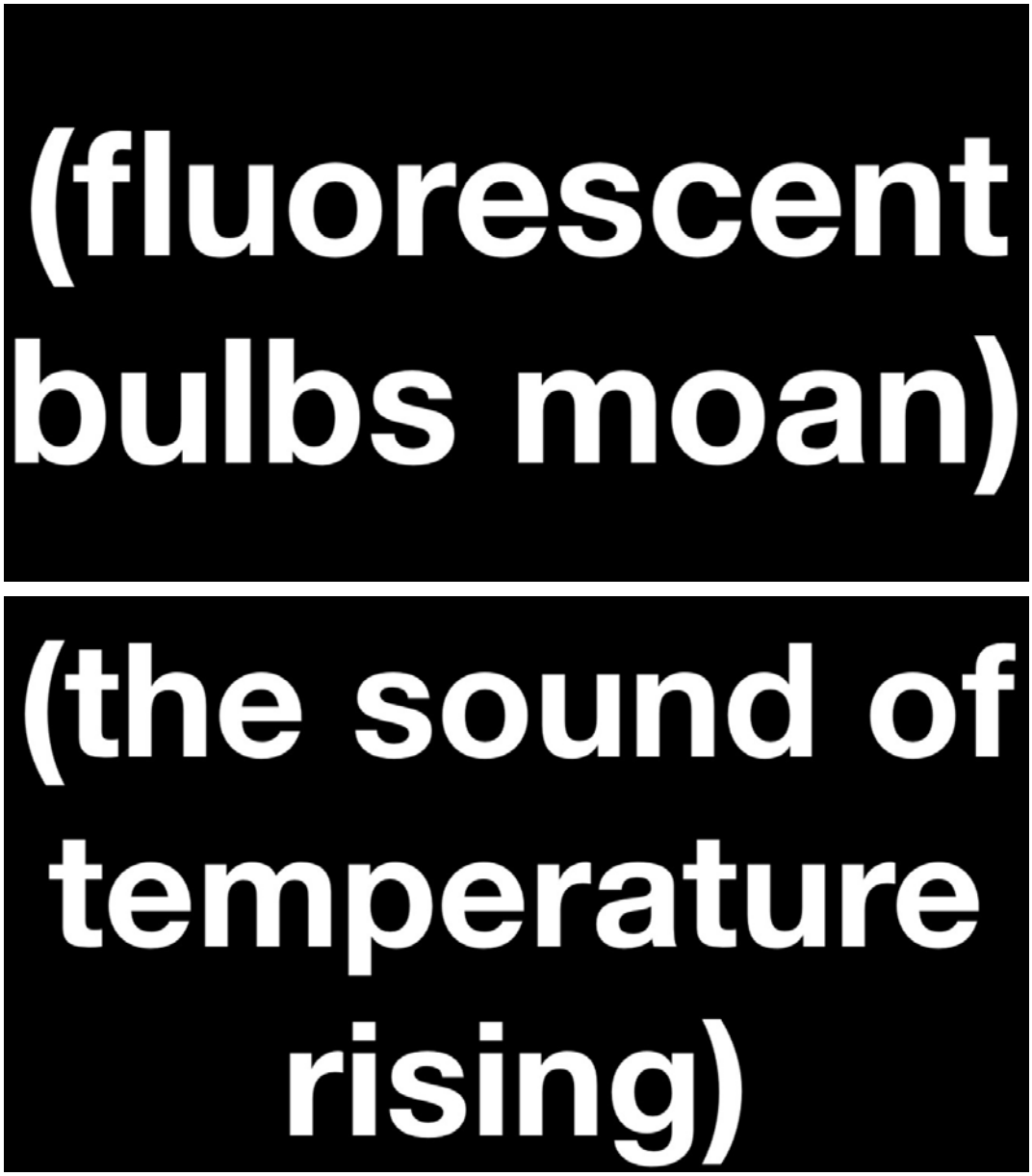

Fig. 4. Digital iPad captions used by Kim during *(LISTEN)*. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

enforce norms of sound-making and listening in public and private space. Despite cultural presumptions that Deaf people live in a silent world, few are likely to consider sound, noise, and the politics of listening as carefully as Deaf and HoH people, whose lives are

circumscribed by barriers to acoustical information. Kim's works, such as *(LISTEN)*, portray the complexity of Deaf life—and Deaf culture—in and beyond society's ableist sonic infrastructures and ideologies, envisioning encounters with listening through memory, affect, and non-acoustical perceptual modes that integrate sight, touch, taste, and smell. In this process, they activate sound as a category unbound from a single aesthetic or social modality and challenge ideologies that privilege certain ranges and abilities of hearing over others.

(LISTEN) subverts dominant histories and theories of sonic art that center the experiences and values of hearing people. Rethinking the soundscape as a site for social critique, this article critiques modes of soundwalking that perpetuate oppressive systems of power, especially those that naturalize and normalize hearing and/or interpret sonic environments as neutral spaces of perception and consumption. Engaging contemporary soundscape theory in a consideration of deafness, power, and control, this article frames *(LISTEN)* as a critical soundwalk, challenging the discursive and phenomenological barriers that constrain contemporary sonic art theory and history. These barriers, such as embracing socially-constructed values of normalcy in hearing, are identified by Christopher Kentz as reinforcing a broader "hearing line," theorized as an "invisible boundary separating deaf [sic] and hearing people" in society (18).[32]

Kim's *(LISTEN)* reinterpreted *Listen* (1966) by sonic artist Max Neuhaus (1939–2009), an early example of soundwalking (within colonialist trajectories of Western art and music).[33] In this practice, listeners move throughout a dynamic acoustical environment, or *soundscape*, in search of aesthetic meaning. A soundwalk aims to activate one's perception of

[32] "Deaf" is lowercase as appearing in quote. In this article, I use capitalized "Deaf" to connote its relationship to disability as a socio-political identity.
[33] *Listen* (1966) is fully considered in the author's PhD dissertation (Eppley).

sonic space, creating a sense of place in which active listening offers compelling acoustical information about spatial environments typically interpreted visually. Neuhaus realized *Listen* many times between 1966 and 1974. For the first iteration, he asked participants to join him at 14th Street and Avenue C in Manhattan, "where the street bisects a power plant," the same location as Kim (Neuhaus 63). Neuhaus—like Kim, who realized her version on the original's fiftieth anniversary—led them through the area to transform the sounds of the street into avant-garde environmental music.

Neuhaus's *Listen* represents a detachment of sound from conventional musical categories, and the formation of "sound art" as a discrete genre of "dematerialized" postwar art. But what mode of listening develops in this framework? Who is allowed to creatively engage and interpret the soundscape? What manner of soundwalking emerges from Neuhaus's epistemology of listening, where the local soundscape is acousmatically mediated as raw sonic material, detached from the community and observed from the outside?[34]

Rather than observing the soundscape and larger sensory environment from the outside-in, Kim deployed an inside-out perspective that emphasized a non-cochlear and multisensory approach to listening that centered community relationships using an expanded definition of sound. Developing a route (see fig. 5) based on her personal experiences and social position, Kim redefined the soundscape from a Deaf cultural position, inviting participants to consider: What does "temperature rising" sound like? How do we feel fluorescent lightbulbs "moan?" Which noises convey the concept, or event, of "darkness manifesting?" *(LISTEN)* foregrounded the many affordances that deafness and Deaf culture provide to sonic art practice

[34] In a 1990 reflection on *Listen* and soundwalking as a post-Cagean practice, Neuhaus described "passing through Puerto Rican street life" before returning to his artist studio (63), a phrasing that sets himself and his listeners as detached from their urban setting, which is then cast as an exotic and racialized place from a settler colonial vantage.

and scholarship, a paradigm that prioritizes cochlear perception over other modalities of listening. And by enclosing Neuhaus's original title in a caption—*(LISTEN)*—Kim expanded the formal boundaries of soundwalking to include more than sound itself.

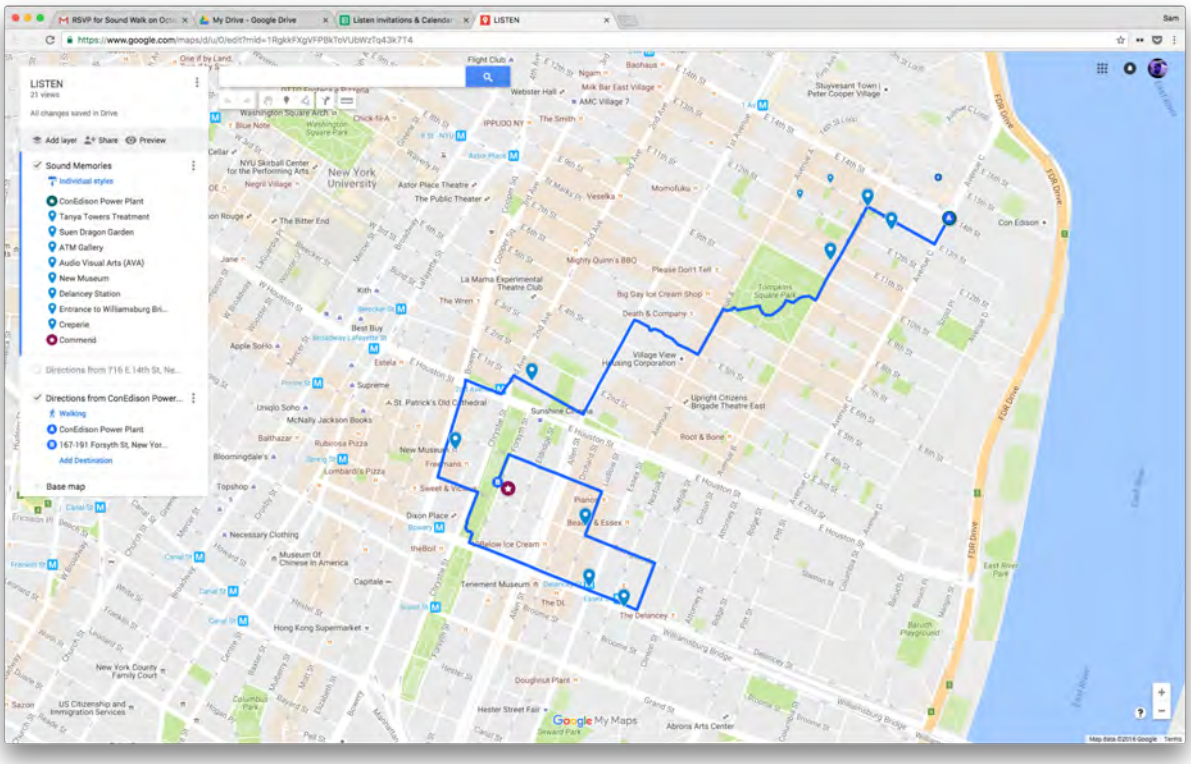

Fig. 5. Screenshot showing route of *(LISTEN)*. Reproduced by permission of Charles Eppley.

Following Con Edison, stops included the Suen Dragon community garden, where Kim met a man who did not know ASL but with whom she communicated through facial expression, touch, and body language. Later, she reflected on her career outside of two galleries where she had formative encounters with sound as an artistic medium. By the New Museum, she described the discriminatory experiences that she often endures as a Deaf artist working in museums that do not prioritize accessibility, and a harrowing bike accident on the Bowery. In the Delancey Street subway station, she described feeling train announcements

resonate in her winter coat pockets, the rumbling vibration of cars on the Williamsburg Bridge, and sweet and savory fragrances from a nearby creperie.

Early in *(LISTEN)*, Kim stopped at Tanya Towers, a residential facility providing housing and behavioral services to Deaf, HoH, and DeafBlind individuals (see fig. 6). Kim recounted how newly-implemented public policies reduced access to Deaf services and resources in the early 2000s: "I was working here during the blackout," Kim said, "and learned that mental illness is very real, and access to services is very tough… A lot of Deaf clubs [closed], and it was my first experience with gentrification." As the Deaf historian Jaipreet Virdi reminds us, deafness is "perceived as a problem in dire need of a solution" and situated in a "misunderstood [and] political body moving between and beyond borders" (31). In response, *(LISTEN)* reconceives soundwalking as a barrier-breaking practice oriented toward community-building and multisensory communication. This model contrasts the extractive acousmatic model represented by Neuhaus's *Listen*, where sounds are detached from not only their sources but also systems of power that organize society through a politics of listening, reinforcing the "hearing line." Kim has discussed her own experiences of exclusion, ranging from museums that do not pay for interpreters and captioning, to family members and friends who refuse to learn how to sign (Brown). The experience of being left out of conversation at a table full of hearing people, known as "dinner-table syndrome," is common for Deaf and HoH individuals. The experience contributes to what Kim calls a "Deaf rage" that manifests in response to not only social isolation but the many "lifelong consequences [of audism] that impact Deaf people's health, education, and employment" (Brown).

Listening can help make sense of the world around us, past and present, but it is not an objective or neutral process. Nina Sun Eidsheim argues that listening is a multisensory event

Fig. 6. “Deaf Persons Crossing” sign outside of Tanya Towers. Reproduced by permission of Charles Eppley.

used to "forge our relations to one another" (3-6). When we listen, we reinforce "a particular set of values" that mobilize hierarchies of race, gender, and disability (Eidsheim 3-6). To *decolonize* listening and deploy soundwalking as a tool for imagining alternatives to "dominant ideas about space and knowledge"—as argued by musicologist Allie Martin in the article "Hearing Change in the Chocolate City: Soundwalking as Black Feminist Method"—we must disempower inequity where it exists, including the audist and classist roots of soundscape practice and theory that prioritize hearing culture. How can soundwalking interrupt the "hearing line" to examine a politics of listening in contemporary art and within soundscape studies, a field being reexamined from critical social perspectives that reveal how sound and listening codify intersecting power dynamics of class, race, ethnicity, and gender?[35]

Philosopher Robin James argues that we must not essentialize sonic experiences that are deeply subjective, as sound is a "sociohistorically specific concept" (7). Further, Jonathan Sterne shows how soundscape studies itself "began from disability," arguing that disability simulations (crude generalizations of "blind, Deaf and wheelchair-based experiences") have played a misguided role in defining our dominant theories of sonic space (13). However, James suggests that sound and resonance are still useful for theorizing social practices designed "to avoid and/or oppose systemic relations of domination" (5-6). *(LISTEN)* exemplifies such a qualitative mode of listening in which sound is a subjective and unstable category that evades the regimes of auditory quantification. Whereas Neuhaus's *Listen* arguably concealed the artist's own social position through a process of detachment and normalized hearing, Kim's

[35] For example, Rebecca Lentjes has written extensively on the gendered soundscape of anti-choice protests at U.S. abortion clinics, coining the term "sonic patriarchy" to describe the methods of gendered domination through noise and forced listening. See Lentjes et al., "The Ripping Apart of Silence"; Lentjes, "The Sonic Politics of the US Abortion Wars."

work foregrounds her own phenomenological subjectivity and social embeddedness. Rather than objectifying the soundscape as a neutral resource, *(LISTEN)* reimagines soundwalking as an empathetic practice for interpersonal connection and community building, beyond individual hearing abilities. Subverting dominant logics of the soundscape, Kim advocates for the moral imperative to control one's own narrative in a society designed for others: "Hearing people have the privilege to be misunderstood, but I can't afford to be misunderstood, [because] that equals lost opportunities, a loss of my rights" (Brown).

Carla Rice, Susan D. Dion, and Eliza Chandler argue that it is essential to reckon with the legacies of colonization in the visual arts through disability. Working from this proposition, this article argues that such a reckoning extends beyond the perceptual domain of vision.[36] Centering Deaf culture and disability studies helps us to understand how sonic artworks embody and act on a politics of listening (whether or not artists intend to do so) to serve techno-social cultures that reinforce and/or dismantle systems of oppression. We must thus cultivate space for Deaf, HoH and DeafBlind people to convey, theorize, and model their own experiences of sound. Furthermore, it is an ethical historical imperative, especially in light of Deaf and HoH erasure, to avoid reproduce a "hearing line" in our interpretations of the sonic. If we desire to decolonize sonic art and sound studies—i.e., to ascertain and counteract its many harms by yielding power to those who have been harmed—then we need to actively acknowledge and disempower the widespread inequities that comprise our scholarship, including by shedding ableist ideologies that impose limited epistemologies of listening defined by hearing culture and enforced by hearing people.

[36] For example, the DeafBlind poet John Lee Clark has written about how museum touch tours can enforce a visual hegemony that privileges sight over touch.

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