

Jingle: Session Podcast: Artists. The production of this podcast was made possible by the kind support of the Dorotheum.

Bettina Spörr: Welcome to today's podcast with Christine Sun Kim who is opening her exhibition "Cues on Point" this evening. My name is Bettina Spörr and I had the great pleasure to work with Christine on this fantastic exhibition. Today's podcast is interpreted by Day Heisinger-Nixon and Beth Staehle. Christine shows in her exhibition "Cues on Point", the brand new double channel video installation with the same title, "Cues on Point". It actually shows interpreter Beth Staehle who is sitting with us at the moment and interpreting this talk in a work that shows the continuous engagement with Christine's Super Bowl performance from 2020, so three years ago. And this work focuses especially on the collaboration between Christine and her interpreter, Beth. The common denominator of the works in the exhibition are three topics. One is echo, something Christine works on for a long time. The other one is debt, another topic that has also been triggered by her experience from living in Germany for many years now and her experience of being an American citizen who was born and educated in the US. And the third one is the topic of collaboration, which also plays a great role in her work and in her life in the form of her collaboration with interpreters, but also with other artists, which she made an artistic intervention for the accompanying book, "*DRAW A BLANK – BLANK ZIEHEN*", which is also published on the occasion of this exhibition. So I think these are the three topics we should talk about and also about the works in the exhibition. And there is also kind of the overlaps and layers that are in this works. So maybe we start with the echo because this is a topic that you really work on for a long time.

Christine Sun Kim: Great. Thank you, Bettina. I'm just so happy to be here to be able to talk with you today. Maybe before we get too far into this conversation, I'm going to describe the sign for "echo". When you're signing "echo" in American Sign Language, you'll use your nondominant hand to represent a surface and then you use your dominant hand to be the movement of the sound. So you move the sound towards the surface, the sound then hits the surface and bounces off creating an echo. If you could see me signing it here today, you'd understand and see how it looks like an echo or a sound hitting the surface and then echoing after that. But that's the origin of a lot of my work, because to me an echo is actually a very big theme in my life. I don't know, obviously, echo relates to sound, to music, to architecture. And I'm sure people are wondering: "What does that have to do with my life as a Deaf person?" But I'll tell you my experience growing up, always only having access to secondhand information has been an echo. I access information through another language being echoed to me. Whether that's accessing television programs through captions or whether that's Beth echoing what I'm saying, so that you have access to it. I sign in American Sign Language, Beth then echoes that into English, which means there isn't a direct transfer of information from me to you. Instead, we lose a little bit of its quality as it echoes from one surface to another, from one person to another. And when I think about how I navigate everyday life and the world in general, an echo comes up and it does so in my work as well. Here, we have this mural and I'm also working on thinking about how echoes can become the experience of musical notes and musical notation. What happens is, you end up having layers upon layers of work, of concepts of experiences and that's where I find myself.

Now, the echoes that I've been working on in my work have become the idea of debt and working on that practice in my work. And so that's what brings us here today too.

Bettina Spörr: Yeah, this is the second big topic. I still would like to stay a little bit longer with the echo because also in this exhibition, maybe we should give a brief visual image of the exhibition: So in the centre of the exhibition is the double channel video installation which is installed on a wall that has been painted. It's part of the mural. In the back area of the exhibition is the dominating, it's a massive mural that is going from ceiling to a bottom and along four walls. And in the front zone there is like works on paper in your typical technique. You like to work with charcoal on paper and in a big format. The exhibition is kept in black and white. It's also your usual colour palette. You very rarely use other colours, right? So it's kind of mostly black and white. I can totally understand what you mean with this feeling of also frustration by this waiting and what you describe as echo that you made this experience also quite physically livable for us because we are in this echo space that you created. And we feel this kind of also sometimes almost claustrophobic feeling this space creates with this kind of huge black mountains that surround us. So I think it's a special quality of all your exhibitions and also of this one. When you enter the space then you really feel that the whole exhibition is also, it's like a composition of individual works, but they become like one image and with very strong visuals. So I think, this is this translation of this kind of your feelings into visual experience for audiences is like really fantastically done in in your work. I just wanted to kind of add this to this echo topic because I think that's such an interesting part that it becomes so physical and also in in the series of drawings from the "Echo Trap" and from the series "Corner Trap" that are in the front area, they have also cinematic quality because you described it as different degrees of claustrophobia and different degrees of echoes and they are jumping sometimes smaller, sometimes bigger. So it's like a film almost of film stills. But now let's go back to this kind of how the echo led you to the debt works.

Christine Sun Kim: Sure. So thinking about my life as an American living in Berlin, which I've been living that life for about 10 years and I still do live in Berlin. But having that decade, I found myself being somebody who's finally paid off their student loans. I'm somebody who finally has some savings and some other financial freedoms that I've experienced due to not being in debt. I also have experienced government support that one gets, being somebody who lives in Germany that you don't get as somebody who lives in the US. And having these experiences have actually made me quite angry. I can see my family I see my friends back in the United States and they're struggling. Some of them have to have two jobs. I used to have to have two jobs just to make ends meet. Still living paycheck to paycheck when I was living in New York and leaving New York being in Germany. I've been able to remove myself from that mindset. I used to think that it was normal to have to hustle to have to live paycheck to paycheck, to have to have two jobs just to make it. But that's not healthy. And living in Berlin has given me the distance to see that. It's given me an opportunity to not have to think about money every day. And for those who again, aren't here with us, the sign for debt is actually quite similar to the sign for echo. So I mentioned that the sign for echo uses your hand, but the sign for debt actually uses one finger. Like if you think about the gesture for: "Hey, pay up." That's similar to the sign for debt in American Sign Language. It's also the sign for "owe", it's also the sign for "afford" depending on how you modulate the sign and also how you modulate the context. So going back to that, I just thought about the discrepancies

and the differences I've experienced living in the US and living in Germany. But being an American who's also Deaf, I have different experiences too, being Deaf in Germany is different than it is being Deaf in the US. In the US, there's laws to protect and to assure certain rights are in place. So it's interesting as an American, it seems like we're in debt financially but also socially because despite all these things, life still isn't perfect in the US. We have a lot of trauma, a lot of different minority groups have trauma that have contributed to the milieu of life in the US. And maybe of all the rights that I have in Germany, I'm still more in debt in the, in the US in more ways than just financially. If we think about the political climate, I don't feel like any time soon we unite or we have this kind of healing. It's interesting because debt also speaks to how people make decisions for you. It might not be direct decision making, but how the government decides to run the country affects our financial liberty. It affects our access to rights, it has connections to power, right? Their decisions politically put us at a loss. We're not in power, we lose our power. This also speaks to generational debt, generational trauma, how these things get passed down over and over again. And so I think about echoes, I think about debt, I think about echo traps, how you get stuck in these patterns over and over again, how people do these repetitions, they repeat themselves and the government is part of this, they perpetuate these things over and over again, keeping some people in place being trapped.

Bettina Spörr: What I also find very interesting is this question of social responsibility or social debt in a way and coming back to Europe. Europe or many countries in Europe are based on a different economic system, on a welfare state, on a social security state that's very different from the US. And I think many of us can hardly imagine how it is, you know, how one can survive in such a capitalist system and structure. On the other hand, you also explained that in Europe, the right situation is a lot worse. So it's kind of uh for Deaf people to live in Germany, you have less possibilities, I guess, or less chances. So it's, it's easier and you don't have to fight. I think that's also... You, you once mentioned that you don't feel so comfortable exhibiting in Europe or not yet. Maybe because you have to fight harder and to explain basically the basics that are already understood and given in the US. It's like the question with the interpreters, for example. So, can you maybe give us a little bit of an idea of where the differences are or how or why in the US, the legal situation is so much better?

Christine Sun Kim: Yeah. Yeah, I'm thinking about it. So obviously, I can't speak on the behalf of every American or every European. But what we know about Europe, at least is that American Sign Language is not a European sign language. So just that in and of itself makes it harder to get American Sign Language interpreters. Well, whereas being in the US, of course, there's American Sign Language or ASL interpreters everywhere. And it's interesting because interpreting as a field has become more popular as a career to pursue. So I have more options in the US. Of course, through my career, I've ended up finding myself working with a smaller pool of interpreters. But what I can say is in Europe, I find that the countries where I work and the people I meet are kind of surprised at the fact that they have to provide interpreters or sometimes I have to convince that I need to, because these are long days and this is part of the interpreters working standard, that this must be paid for by the entity and other negotiations. You did mention welfare countries or welfare states. I will say that some countries are wonderful at providing support for Deaf lives, which is what should be the case in many ways, it's good to have maybe some welfare options for Deaf people. But at times

people can come become complacent if you have things taken care of for you, right? But that means not that anything's wrong, but it just means that your access to rights don't improve, right? Because in the US, I don't know, maybe I should say that because we're a country of immigrants, right? We have a lot of interactions between different groups and a lot of turmoil which allows there to be some room to still grow and negotiate. People can still vote and pass laws and change things, which also is not perfect. But because of that, I think people have kind of spoken up and spoken against something because there is something to speak up against, right? So people ask for accommodations without feeling guilty because they're maybe not given any. Whereas in Europe, I do struggle because I feel stressed to ask for access often times. But with child care, being a working artist, that's not even always included when I work in European context. And so I'm still trying to figure that out. Again, I can't speak on behalf of a whole of anybody because naturally in Europe, every country has their own situation and every country has their own pros and cons. And I'm definitely not saying that the US is the best out of all of them by any means, but I find my experience to be solely mine, right? And mine is that I grew up in the US, I had the ADA law protecting my rights in the way that it does. So naturally, it doesn't compare to the experience of Deaf people growing up in Europe. Admittedly, I came to Germany for more personal reasons. I wanted some space as well from my life in New York and it just so happens that a lot of my exhibitions are in the US. And so I do fly back and forth and I do see the differences often times and admittedly, I don't have a fiery passion to be exhibiting in Europe more by any means. I just, I'm fine with how things are going. Now.

Bettina Spörr: I think the interest is really huge and we got a lot of requests and we were also reaching out to the local Deaf community. And we learned that we know nothing about Deaf life in Austria. And as a private association, contrary to federal museums, we also don't have this obligation to reach out to minority groups. But we try to use your exhibition as a starting point to change and to become more integrative and to establish a barrier free kind of art education programme. So to invite, for example, Deaf audiences to come to the Secession and to also provide kind of interpreting services. So your exhibition will hopefully change something to the better and will last even when your exhibition will be over again. The third part that I would like to, to talk about is the collaboration part which is also most visible maybe in the work "Cues on Point" in the exhibition, but also in the publication. And I think that's a very important part for you and your artistic... and maybe you can explain a little bit of what this work is about because there is this kind of confusion, also because you did several works on the Super Bowl. But I think this work is not about your performance at the Super Bowl, but it's about this collaboration with the interpreter and about making visible this processes of collaboration and what it really needs in order to provide this interpretation service.

Christine Sun Kim: Yeah, so the book I will at least say is more about revisiting an old idea one that I've had for a long time. And it wasn't until the opportunity came up here that I realized I could make this book. I actually got over excited. I asked 54 people to contribute to this book. And ultimately, it is about collaboration with interpreters, but it's also about how people oftentimes speak on my behalf. Sometimes I don't mind, right? Like my mom might say something like: "Oh, my daughter wants water. Could you get her some water?" Something like as benign as that, right? But it happens oftentimes. And so it's about how I navigate the world. Obviously, I can do it on my own. I can write back and forth. I can text.

But when it comes to spoken language, I feel like I'm collaborating with 50 people just to arrive to complete one simple task. And at first I used to kind of complain about it. It was exhausting at least educationally in university. I had to work with note takers, figure out scheduling for interpreters, just to go to class, whereas other people didn't, but I have kind of come to a place recently where I've reset that mindset and been like – or at least I've thought to myself, this is my life, I've accepted it, I've embraced it, right. And because of that, I've started to find some freedom in that. I feel so lucky to have worked with such a great group of interpreters. I also have opportunities to meet great new ones too. But whenever that happens, whenever I find myself working with interpreters, it requires a lot of negotiation, collaboration. And that process is fun too. And being able to do that. I've kind of paralleled that experience with empty staff lines, which is something you'll see in some of my earlier work. I have a lot of staff lines, a lot of scores and now I'm revisiting it 10 years later, so to speak. In my book, there are empty staff lines and however, the collaborator or contributor illustrated or drew those staff lines, affects how ultimately the performance of those staff lines comes out, right? If somebody draws a thick line versus a thin line that impacts the performance. So it's important to ask ourselves, where did these staff lines come from? Who drew them? That imprint is there, right? That voice is on that page by the person who drew the staff line and then whoever fills in the staff lines by making musical notes, well, that person also puts their voice on the page and now two voices become one. And so I couldn't help myself. I had to reach out to 54 people, including my daughter and my husband. I'm so excited to have them be part of the book. But because of that, whenever I can have an opportunity to bring my family into my practice, I love to do that. And we've done that with the book. What's great is ultimately, the book is like basically a book of sheet music. You can tear out a page, it's perforated. It'll be an easy tear. You can then fill in the staff lines as you choose and it can be yourself who will perform this piece or you could give it to somebody else to perform it. There's a lot of voices on that page, ultimately, by the end of that process, because I initially came up with the instructions. So my voice is there. I also chose the contributors, they then created the staff line, so their voice is there, then we made it into the book. So whoever made the book, right has their voice, then we have whoever drew the notes on the staff lines, their voice is there and then the person who performed it, their voice is there. But don't forget there's still the audience. And in that experience, they put their voice on that page too. And so it becomes a very dense page, very quickly to speak to the experience of collaboration.

Bettina Spörr: It has very many layers like your work in general. And I think it's also, it's such a beautiful joint between the exhibition and the piece “Cues on Point” that shows the cues, the cue system that you developed with Beth for the performance at the Super Bowl and the staff lines and this, this piece that you did for the book. And you also connected it by saying it's an homage to interpreters and people who spoke on your behalf. And that's a beautiful connection. I would also like to point out that this publication is the first one in...

Christine Sun Kim: Sorry, I just thought of something I'd love to add...

Bettina Spörr: Yeah.

Christine Sun Kim: ...about the collaboration piece that we were just talking about. I will say that if the collaboration process is not going well, right? It's just kind of operating at a minimum. What I have also found in my experience is that people then listen to me less. So the less I'm able to then communicate my ideas if the collaboration is not going well. However, if the collaboration is going so well, super smooth, people find themselves engaged. I can see that they're actively listening to me as a result of a good collaboration process, which is why I'm so obsessed with collaboration, ensuring that people understand me, because when I do that, I see good results, right? I'm able to deliver the joke successfully or deliver my ideas successfully, which is ultimately my aim.

Bettina Spörr: Great, and I wanted to give every audiences that listen to this podcast now the possibility to check this book, because it's the first one in the new publication series from Secession and it's also available as a download as a free download on the website. So you can download this book, you can purchase this book or you can just look at the book online and see what Christine is now talking about. Yeah, and I think we have to come to an end. Unfortunately, our time is over and I would like to thank you once more for this beautiful exhibition and maybe just a brief glimpse into your future, because at the moment, you're in a in a residency in London and you mentioned that you're working on a new project that is a bit similar but different from the collaboration piece that you did for the publication. Maybe, just at the end, give us a glimpse of your next work coming, please.

Christine Sun Kim: Oh, sure, sure. So, I'm currently, as you said, doing a residency at Somerset House and also the Goethe-Institute, which is my first time doing a residency where I was able to have my family join me, which has been so wonderful to get that kind of support. And so I've accepted because I've been playing around with this idea for shaped canvases. Like the book that we did here, I feel like I have some old ideas kind of coming back to me. And part of that's because I'm finally in a place with the right resources, support and team. And what's nice about what I'm doing in the residency is that we have a CNC printer at Somerset House and that helps get the wood framing in place. And then we're going to find somebody who can specialize in stretching canvas the right way. And I'm hoping to have shaped canvas and for those canvases to be blank, like you said, just like the book. And it's going to be based on the shapes that you'll see in signs. Like you see the shape of echo in a lot of my work currently. And it takes up like you said, a lot of space in front of you, right? It becomes physical. And so what I'm hoping to do with signs for my work at Somerset House is that that space then becomes canvases. I feel like my work practice is just never going to be only my voice. It's always going to be my voice, pushing against another one or overlapping or layering another one. And I'm fine with that.

Bettina Spörr: Thank you very much, Christine. And the exhibition will be opened in a few hours. So thank you.

Christine Sun Kim: Can't believe it, so soon. I gotta get ready. I gotta get my dress on for tonight.

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