

## Lautstrom #36

### Social Currency or Skin? Notions on Voice, Absence and Presence of Sound

A conversation with Christine Sun Kim and Zeynep Bulut, conceived and facilitated by Anna Bromley<sup>1</sup>



For the #36 edition of the *LAUTSTROM* features, I invited New York City based artist Christine Sun Kim and London based musicologist Zeynep Bulut into reboot.fm's radio studio in the HKW Berlin.

Deaf since birth, **Christine Sun Kim** is unlearning sound etiquette through performance, drawings and composition. She was told as a child not to make noise. Noise was something she should control even though she could not hear it. Meanwhile she explores ways of transmuting sound and investigates her relationship with it. But her work also challenges the ways in which the hearing take sound for granted. Christine often employs her own voice in work. As she can feel it inside her body it is accessible to her.

**Zeynep Bulut** is a researcher in the field of sound studies, voice and experimental music. Her work theorizes the physical and phenomenal emergence of the voice and its role in the constitution of the self. She is currently working on her first monograph entitled „Skin-Voice - Contemporary Music between Speech and Language“. Alongside her scholarly work she has composed and performed sound and voice pieces for concert-, theatre-, video- and installation-art. She received her PHD in Critical Studies, Experimental Practices in Music from the University of California at San Diego in 2011. She was a postdoctoral research fellow at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry from 2011 to 2013. Right now, she is a lecturer at the Department of Music at Kings College London.

The following conversation, in which I typed-translated for Zeynep and Christine, elaborates on experiencing the physicality of sound and on theorizing voice as an interface.

## TERMS AND CONDITIONS

We, Christine Sun Kim (referred to hereinafter as "First Party") and Thomas Benno Mader (referred to hereinafter as "Second Party"), agree to collaborate on the project titled "Recording Contract" for BOMB Magazine. Both parties agree to abide by the terms and conditions as provided below:

- Auditory signals exist only when heard.
- Both parties agree to exclude auditory signals from this act of communication.
- The Second Party will activate the digital audio recorder before sealing the envelope.
- On August 27th, 2013, the Second Party will ship the the digital audio recorder express from Berlin (Second Party location) to New York City (First Party location).
- The First Party will stop the recording upon arrival of the envelope.
- The Second Party agrees to never listen to the recorded material, neither in it's full extent, nor in the edited versions.
- The First Party is already in the position to abide the condition provided above.
- The First Party will edit the recorded material based on the visual indicators and small transducers provided by the editing software.
- The auditory signals recorded during the shipping and this contract will be posted on the BOMB magazine website and will be made available to third party audiences.

We understand that any violation of the aforesaid terms and conditions will result in the removal of the sound files from the BOMB Magazine website and the First Party's hard drive, as well as all cloud drives. Effective immediately. Without the presence of a third party to enforce these terms and conditions this agreement will be based solely on the honor system.

In case this envelope does not reach the First Party location due to the overuse of key words like "BOMB" and "envelope" during the Email exchange between First Party and Second Party, we will declare this contract null and void.

CSK

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Christine Sun Kim  
First Party

8/22/13

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Date



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Thomas Benno Mader  
Second Party

8/27/13

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Date

**Anna Bromley:** Christine, when you were a child you had a voice trainer. At the same time the trainer told you not to make noise. Did the trainer help you to get in touch with noise and the translation of it?

**Christine Sun Kim:** When I was little, my parents wanted me to inhabit some kind of tool where I could convey my thoughts, questions or „function“ better among people (non-signers, that is). While growing up, I never really questioned the decision of learning how to speak with voice, considering the fact that I cannot hear my own voice. I find that extremely ironic as I do know how to make certain sounds without knowing what they sound like at all. In a way, the speech therapist has helped me understand the sound rules, or maybe spoken (vocal) language rules. I eventually learnt which sounds are considered not appropriate, so I try to avoid them. I think that was one of the first things I`ve mastered in. How things are suppose to sound like. And it is also the beginning of not having any ownership of my own sound.

**AB:** Your work translates sound into other forms as an investigation and performance. You often mentioned that you regard sound as currency.

**CSK:** First I need to be clear with the definition of currency. The term means a lot of things. In a way I state that word with wittiness, literally and figuratively. There is so much social currency that comes with sound. To me, there is a clear hierarchy of obtaining information. It feels like people highly depend on their hearing to recognize their surroundings or form their understanding of things. Of course this is subjective. In my case (or some situations), it feels like I`ve experienced and seen enough to determine that sound has so much more currency than visuals do. There is a clear place for it. Hence I am thinking on terms of visual languages and how they are less valued than spoken languages.

**AB:** I associate your notion of currency as a trade value for information. Now vast amounts of informations are exchanged rather visually throughout the web. Is spoken language still as valuable as it used to be?

**CSK:** Oh yes! The more advanced technology is, the more audio it becomes and maybe slightly more valued. For example Apple and Google are working on perfecting speech recognition softwares like SIRI, where you can easily do voice commands. That is an example of how the internet is rapidly shifting towards that direction.

**AB:** There`s certainly something political about the relation of the hearing and the deaf world.

**CSK:** Yes very much so—sometimes overly political. I think there is a linguistic and cultural frame that hearing people need to move out of, or let it become more multi-dimensional. I think they often impose their ideologies upon us, which is why there`s always tension between both worlds. The politics toward sound and vocal languages are so great that I often link them to „currency“.

**AB:** Isn't currency being political?

**CSK:** Yes, it is political. It's often based on dominating (majority) ideas. I guess I don't want my art to be some kind of political statement but I'm actually playing up on that and tagging along. I think I'm trying to convert that into a tool for my art.

**AB:** Zeynep Bulut was nodding when we spoke about the currency notion.

**Zeynep Bulut:** Yes, I like the idea and am inspired by thinking about voice as currency because it is not a concept that I thought about before. But I thought about how we don't actually possess our voices, how our voices are not a property, an object or a fully objectifiable thing. To me, voice is such a liquid and multisensory matrix of a variety of physical, imagined and phenomenal entities. Everything is entangled within the complexity of the voice. When I thought about Christine's notion of voice as currency it also highlighted the notion of exchange and liquidity, just like money that we exchange on a daily basis. Money doesn't assure anything other than a negotiation or an interaction. It's vulnerable and open to change, very much situated and contextual. Of all these things I was reminded. I need to think about it more of course but I think the way I theorize the human voice responds to this idea. I theorize the voice as skin, as a physical and phenomenal matrix of all senses, as a point of contact and separation between self and the external world. So when I think about voice in the form of a currency it actually operates as an interface. Obviously one has to fill in the blanks for the conceptual bridge that I'm drawing right now, but I think there is a resonance between these concepts. And not to mention all the economic, cultural and political aspects of the notion of currency. They're all at stake.

**AB:** I'm „translating“ for Christine, so I'm typing your thoughts into my text editor.

**ZB:** It's beautiful, I like it. I really like the pace of everything!

**CSK:** When one goes past voice, what is there?

**ZB:** I would say, it is a very physical absence, but also a very imagined presence, as one speaks. I'm speaking to you now. You're hearing my voice and you hear it in the form of an embodied sound. When I speak, when my voice literally departs from my body it actually goes all around. That's why voice is an interesting phenomenon along with the phenomenon of sound. You cannot perfectly locate where it starts or where it ends. It goes all around. But the way you incorporate it is in the form of embodied sound. And that embodied sound is quiet material, quiet physical. How to identify it, how to signify it, how to translate it—these are questions related to our own discourses and narratives of understanding of what counts as sound or what counts as voice. But apart from that - and perhaps one can not perfectly detach these

discourses from the absence or presence of sound – embodiment of sound might trigger and unsettle certain normative conceptions of sound and voice. When you speak and when your voice leaves your body it does not really fully leave your body, I would say. It meets another body. There is a shared space between the two and it is not perfectly locatable, by which I mean, it is a very continuous yet specified in a particular space. And I don't mean to mystify, I don't mean to immaterialize the voice. But I do think that this shared space actually very powerfully triggers what one is used to hear.

**CSK:** I find my own voice to be somewhat of a form of a strong physical presence. I think I'm reacting to my sign-language, which is highly spacial, very similar to what you perceive voice. I don't really use voice as much as you guys do. When I vocalize rather than making speech words I find my own voice internal, getting in touch with my internal presence is like a reminder of my physical beingness (or that I have a sounding voice box), because I often feel I am constantly in touch with my external and immaterial presence... when I sign to someone, that person partially mimicks my moving face as I speak, so I can actually see my voice on the other person's face. It's a performative language, totally not one-sided.

**ZB:** I think that's such a beautifully laid out operation of the voice, of what we also experience, I would say! If you allow me I would like to go back to how I came to my theory of skin-voice because it may be worth while to mention that. In relation to what Christine is talking about. I came to my theory of skin-voice while I was analyzing the non-linguistic use of the voice in European Avantgarde and American Experimental Music, mostly contemporary classical music. The non-linguistic use of the voice is basically about non-verbal sounds and also the use of bodily sounds. These bodily sounds are sometimes amplified electronically, sometimes they're just accustically amplified, If you think about such aesthetics there are many examples like John Cages *Songbooks* - a huge collection of pieces. Some of them explicitly instruct the performer to deconstruct the words and to stretch the language, and the speaking and singing voice along with the language. Or for instance *Microphonie* by Stockhausen, where you have vocal gestures, only sounds - not even any deconstruction of the language. There are other examples like Ligeti's *Aventures*. Obviously within these non-verbal vocalizations, or these non-linguistic aspects, you still have a concern of language or making another language. What I am interested in, is how they allow you to think about the voice before and beyond the weight of verbal language. How they allow you to think about the voice not simply reduced to vocal chords but to all and every sound that you incorporate. Imagine your body as a sponge and you actually incorporate and you hear all sounds! Maybe you're not able to identify all sounds in the same way. But indeed your body constantly vibrates, that is the physical rule. In a way there is no perfect loss of hearing, or voice. This aesthetics that I just mentioned really encourages us to think about how we can imagine voice as a constellation of a variety of bodily noises or vocal gestures, not necessarily limited to your vocal chords producing pressure or tension. This idea is inspiring and

interesting question whether voice can be a locatable organ or something else. Going back to Christine's notion, it allows me to think about the voice in a similar fashion, as sounds that I can imagine on another's face, the voice of the objects or of non-human beings, or about the very concrete sounds that I hear in a sonic environment, a physical environment aligned with my own voice.

I'm not suggesting that voice is not related to language or speech, but on the contrary. I think imagining voice as such as Christine does or as I am trying to portray in my theory, allows us to think about different forms of speech. Language is not the same thing as speech. Being vocal or saying something or being able to conduct a speech act is not fully related to the normative limits of what we consider language. Obviously there is a very embedded connection between the two, which one cannot deny. Given the economy of words and the economy of ways in which we think about things there is an interesting affective register, which sound produces and which sound allows us to think about within the context of speech. I think I'm taking Christine's definition in my way of thinking about the voice.

**AB:** We talked about your concept of the skin-voice. There's another article of yours forthcoming, called „That Uncertain Sound“. It's your first length study in which you quote Veit Erlmanns: „Reason and Resonance —a History of Modern Aurality“<sup>iiii</sup> to reconstruct the history of aurality and the process through which the ear assumed a central role in modern culture and rationality. Christine said that she finds her own voice internal through her vocalization.

**CSK:** Because of both external and internal presences, I'm beginning to think maybe we are talking about secondary voices.

**ZB:** Very true. I would even say there's no secondary but third and fourth and many voices because it is such a multiple phenomenon if you think about how it actually is being reshaped in line with the interactions and in line with the sounds. But there are two things. Let's start with the physical presence.

**CSK:** Dimensions of voice.

**ZB:** Multiple dimensions of the voice, multiplicities of the voice. That's why I do consider voice as mingling. And this goes back to the way I imagine voice as skin, influenced and based on Didier Anzieu's notion of *skin ego*<sup>iv</sup> and also by the way Michel Serres talks about noise as mingling.<sup>v</sup> I'll come back to that after I mention a few things about physical presence. When you make a sound or when you respond to sound, there's obviously physical presence at stake, for instance when you speak. I am extending my arm, trying to draw a space, trying to say something with my physical gesture or with another bodily noise. Let's say I'm tapping on my knee.

**CSK:** Agreed! In regards to multiplicities of the voice, I find that people are often hung up on one specific

voice format and I often call it sonic identity. When ever I speak with someone without using my voice for an extended period of time, a few of them would ask me to vocalize or speak with voice so they could imagine my sonic identity —maybe fuller identity (voice) in their eyes. I liked your description of how the act of speaking with voice often puts physical presence at stake.

**ZB:** It`s very true. But I would say imagined absence also relates to sound and to its spatial aspects more than to its visual registers. Obviously when you hear a sound, and this is especially true for radio and telephone voices, you don`t see who`s speaking and you start to imagine the speaking body. The appearance of that person is not a given appearance. It could refer to a lot of people. How you draw a body, that spatial aspect of your imagination is very much at stake with the physical presence of sound as well. That imagination, if you think about it, is quiet material as well. So when I speak about imagined absence, it`s very much embedded in the physical presence of experiencing something, of showing something or of responding to something, of feeling something.

I agree with Christine when she noticed how the physical presence is at stake when using her own voice. But what`s more interesting here is: what is my voice or what is her voice or what is your voice? What defines, what counts as voice? This question is interesting within the context of sign language and within the context of imagining a variety of voices in one singular voice. Again, this brings me back to my departure point which is contemporary classical music and how you are really encouraged to think about all sounds at the expense of a voice, how you`re also encouraged to think about the concrete sounds of an environment as a part of your own voice as well. All these things multiply the definition of the voice. And that`s what`s so promising in this conversation as well!

The touch of the voice is a nother interesting element here. Indeed I would be interested to hear Christines elaboration on that because that would also give me the opportunity to share why I`ve been thinking about voice as skin, why I was keen on Didier Anzieus notion of *skin ego* and why I was inspired by Michel Serres.

**CSK:** What exactly do you mean by *touch of the voice*? To me, voice means two things. First: platform for your thoughts; second: the voice box.

**ZB:** Do you mean the human body or the sounding body by voice box?

**CSK:** Vocal chords. Actual chords.

**ZB:** That`s what we know about the voice, vocal cords, larynx, diaphragm and head and chest. We have voices as such. But to me, the sounding box of the voice is the whole body, it`s not simply the vocal cords. The whole sounding body with its all registers, makes a voice. In other words, a voice is not given,.

**CSK:** So does touch of voice mean the physical aspect of voice in action?

**ZB:** If I needed to specify the touch of voice I would call it the tactility of an embodied sound. When you hear something your body resonates, vibrates with it. The spatial aspect and your physical embodied imagination of images or appearances are very much entangled with the tactility of sound.

**CSK:** Right now I'm thinking of two small things. This might sound a little irrelevant but since I cannot hear „my own“ sound. I could argue that I could hear it but that's an entirely different topic. It often feels like when I have a bad case of gas when your stomach rumbles and it makes sound. It rumbles very similar to my neck when it vibrates but smoothly. Another thing is that I love it when I cannot physically feel my own voice, when I'm at super bassy concerts. Because when you stand close to a huge speaker blaring some song, its bass sends so much vibration into your body, and when you try to vocalize you cannot feel your own voice. I like it when I cannot feel it, totally disembodied. A bit of sadistic, maybe.

**ZB:** There are two things. First voice is a channel of thought. It's more like a mental abstraction, you think in words, you think through language. Your inner voice is speaking to you, your inner thoughts. Second, I'm reiterating what Christine said, you physically vibrate with sounds. The fact that you cannot perfectly vocalize it. The loss is that you cannot perfectly translate the touch of sound with your voice. Can we say, we cannot perfectly translate or vocalize the touch of sound just like you were describing with the speakers? So it's the loss, maybe impossibility of vocalizing the tactility of sound, what you like.

**CSK:** Moreover, I cannot hear my own voice when I vocalize. It's not about vocalizing perfectly. It's like you lose your voice when your body gets surpassed by surrounding bass. Would you guys still hear your own voice in that speaker setting?

**ZB:** You can hear your voice but you may not be able to do so in a very noisy and loud situation. You know that your voice is there. It's not simply about whether I'm able to vocalize that particular sound. It's not simply about whether I hear my scream or not. It's also about how I feel MY whole body as a sounding body and the experience of the sounding body in the web of other external sounds —how does your body speak sound? How does your body make a voice? Can we imagine a voice not necessarily limited to our vocal cords? Can we think about voice as such? Can we think about voice as skin for instance, and what does it do to think about voice as skin? What is the use of it?

**AB:** Christine, would you say that voice is a platform of thought?

**CSK:** A platform (or a skin?) of my presence actually.

**ZB:** I was trying to respond to Christine's point when she said, there are two things —first voice as platform and then voice as physical presence and then maybe another word I missed.



**CSK:** Every time we talk about voice that goes beyond vocal chords, I think about social situations. When I communicate directly with non-signers thru text on I-Phone or I-Pad, it often feels like it questions the skin of my voice perhaps. Sometimes I go *Hum*, to put them at ease, to make a simple sound because I normally don't want to make situations a little awkward or uncomfortable. I guess the skin of voice helps by keeping my place (platform) clear.

**ZB:** Do you consider the skin of your voice as a social mask, as a protective envelope?

**CSK:** As a tool.

**ZB:** That's an interesting thought but that's not what I meant. What Christine suggested is another brilliant idea to think about. But my notion of skin-voice is literally inviting us to think about voice as skin. The theoretical grounding, let me remind, goes back to french psychoanalysts Didier Anzieus notion of *le moi-peau*, which is *skin ego*. He basically reformulates the Freudian ego as skin, as the interface between the self and the external world —the ego as skin. He also talks about the formation of skin, how skin is a constitution of various sensory envelopes. The very primary envelope is sound.

And if you go back to evolutionary biology that's what at stake as far as I know. I'm not an expert but as much as I can tell from the readings that I've done it is related to evolutionary theory like how the very primary tactile envelope of the fetus is sound, mother's organ sounds, mother's voice, which are in tune with the sounds of an external environment. So before the literal skin emerges the fetus emerges as skin, as a constitution of various sensory envelopes. The very first felt envelope for the fetus is sound. That's where he (Anzieu) begins and I take it from there. He talks about other envelopes too, like olfactory envelopes, envelope of suffering and so on. If the very primary tactile envelope is sound, mother's organ sound, her own voice and the sound of the external environments -can we take it from there and can we think about voice as the very primary envelope for us and can we think about voice at the heart of these constellation, at the heart of this combination? This is actually a very physical theory, this is very material.

**AB:** This reminded me on Christine's piece *When Not Concentrated*<sup>vi</sup>. Christine's partner Thomas Benno Mader told her that when she thinks of something and is wondering, she makes sounds. As she was interested in learning what these might sound like she made her partner describe these. She then re-enacted the unconscious sounds, she makes while concentrating. As, like Christine once said: „Because it is impossible to fully replicate the circumstances in which I made this unconscious noise, my re-enactment easily becomes a misinterpretation of my own voice. I'm beginning to think that I have two voices, like two different realities that are far from each other but in the same place.“ Earlier we mentioned the notion of embodying two or even multiple voices.

**ZB:** We did. I mean in terms of the many voices, like how it's not simply your inner voice and your external

voice but there are a lot of voices speaking in your mind. We are not able to silence our minds and a variety of people speak in us. Its quite interesting, how you talk to yourself, which person talks to you through your own voice. How you talk to one another and what`s manifested in there.

**CSK:** Voice being schizo!

**ZB:** There is a schizophrenic aspect to it too, very true. Not as a pathology but as an everyday reality. Again, this goes back to the physical phenomenon of sound. And that would also go back to that uncertainty of sound, how you cannot perfectly locate where a sound begins and ends. Of course we do have technologies through which we can spatialize sound, objectify and habituate sound to a certain extent. We can predict and get used to a sound, we can control and manipulate it. We can be controlled and manipulated by sounds equally. All these things are true, so it`s all in production, it`s manufactured culturally. On the other hand the materiality of sound by which I mean the physicality of sound always does something else. Your physical experience is not perfectly silenced by your habits in a way. When I say there is a schizophrenic quality in sound I mean the material ambivalence of that experience. The ambivalence is what you`re hearing —you hear the sound and you can still feel anxious etc. There is an affective quality which you cannot perfectly verbalize, fix or repeat, even if you are familiar with that sound. It`s the physical movement of sound, the way you embody it, the way you feel it and the way you translate it, the way you respond to it). The FEEL of sound cannot be perfectly fully habituated. It`s very much related to the material experience. There is always a loss in sound and that loss is not about lack. It is about the impossibility of sonic objectification, the impossibility of objectifying a sound or capturing a sound equally. When you think about voice along these lines, voice is even spookier because it`s very much embodied, it`s coming out of your body. It`s beeing appropriated in your body and it goes out of your body. When you think about sounds within the operation of the voice or how all these sounds could make a voice , voice becomes even more schizophrenic because it is more personalized, even though it`s not a property, not something that you can fully possess, not something static. Voice is particular as embodied sound, as it relates to other sounds.

**AB:** Christine also nods. This operation of the spooky voice almost sounds like a perfect conclusion to me. Our one hour has passed incredibly fast. Thank you both for sharing this hour of thinking together!

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*If you want to obtain ore information on upcoming projects and publications of Christine Sun Kim and Zeynep Bulut you can find informations on the following websites: **christinesunkim.com** and [www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/music/people/acad/bulut](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/music/people/acad/bulut)*

- i This conversation was conducted and recorded in reboot.fm`s radio studio at HKW Berlin, on Sep. 25, 2013 and broadcasted as LAUTSTROM#36 on Dec. 15, 2013 via reboot.fm.
- ii Christine Sun Kim and Thomas Benno Mader: *Recording Contract*, bombsite.com/issues/1000/articles/7373, retrieved Sep. 2, 2013
- iii Erlmann, Veit: *Reason and Resonance. A History of Modern Aurality*, Cambridge, 2010
- iv Anzieu, Didier: *The Skin Ego*, Boston, 1989
- v Serres, Michel: *Genesis*, Ann Arbor, 1997
- vi Kim, Christine Sun: *When Not Concentrated*, <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2013/soundings/artists/5/works/>, retrieved, Sep. 2, 2013