

Notes In/troducing Englyph

By TIM ROSEBOROUGH

I have often had conflicted responses to text-based art. On one hand, I appreciate its role as one of the hallmarks of conceptualism, helping to free art from its reliance on the object. On the other, I find it boring. In this brief note, I detail how I resolved this tension in my own experiments with text-based art and the result of that process.

The past few decades have witnessed a proliferation of contemporary art with text as its basis. One can find text in oil on canvas, in frames, in light boxes, affixed to the wall in vinyl lettering, as instructions, in scrolling LED, on industrially produced street signs, in neon, on tombstones and in

other manifestations too numerous to elaborate here.

I felt that the totality (as opposed to individual instances) of text-based art had the cumulative effect of being visually uncharacteristic and somewhat redundant. I saw words as too closely tethered to their “meaning,” often lacking any fresh sense of the visual. If I were going to look at words, I reasoned, I would rather read a book.

A visit to a Korean restaurant in San Francisco offered a revelation. Presumably by mistake, the waiter offered me a version of the menu in Korean.

I can neither read and write, nor speak, Korean, but I found myself fascinated by the formal properties of the text. I marveled at the order, the array of shapes and the knowledge that this deliberately organized schema of marks was conveying meaning to someone,

but not me.

I recalled how others unfamiliar with Asian languages are fascinated by their form as distinct from what they signify, as evidenced by the legion of people wearing Chinese character tattoos of questionable interpretation.

To me, this Korean-language menu was formal abstraction on a laminated board. To those who understood the language, it meant lunch.

At that moment, and with Cairo, Yucatan, Judd, Stella, Kruger, Turing, Wiener, Kosuth, Haring and Basquiat in mind, I determined to make the English language as unfamiliar as the words on that menu. I would render it as 'abstract,' and yet readable, by conjuring a new set of rules.

My research quickly revealed that creating a

'logographic' system (such as Chinese characters) was not tenable. I didn't have the luxury of centuries to develop an entire constellation of unique glyphs associated with single concepts.

Instead, I re-imagined the alphabet. I created letters that are discernable by their edges and arranged them in a nested manner to form words, each letter inside the one that precedes it. I call this system, Englyph. Englyph is not a new language, but a writing system made with the specific intent of introducing a fresh visual form to text-based artwork, while still conveying meaning.

Much has been made recently of 'data visualization,' wherein certain amounts of statistical information are visualized in such a way as to clarify, streamline and make it understandable. Englyph is a

reverse of that process: a means of 'data obfuscation.'

As for the meal of bibimbap I ordered from the English translation of the menu, it was the best I've had.

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