

Hangul Project Collective: A Study of Resilience and Identity through Intercultural Visual Dialogues between Korean and Global Influence

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Abstract

The Hangul Project Collective is dedicated to the exploration of bilingual and intercultural experiences that engender experiential visual dialogues. Our mission involves the examination of underrepresented visual narratives from diverse intercultural perspectives, utilizing the Hangul alphabet, a typeface derived from Korean consonants and vowels, to create a translingual experience. This multidisciplinary visual research encompasses a wide spectrum of mediums, including typeface design, woodworking, digital art, 3D printing, and game performance. Each of these mediums offers intercultural experiences in a narrative-driven, tactile, interactive, and impressionistic manner. Our principal objective is to introduce innovative approaches to visual storytelling, thereby bridging the divide between traditional and contemporary mediums through the application of cutting-edge technology. In addition, we aim to reflect upon the global significance of Hangul, acknowledging its historical importance as a symbol of resilience during periods of resistance. In today's world, marked by the global prominence of Korean culture, including K-pop and Korean literature, the Hangul Project Collective seeks to showcase the profound nature of this spirit of resistance on a global scale or global exposure too. Furthermore, extending beyond the realm of Hangul, we aspire to contribute to the widespread recognition and support of languages and cultures of various nations facing the threat of extinction due to colonization or other historical factors. Our commitment lies in raising awareness and providing encouragement for these languages and cultures.

Keywords

cross-cultural, multinational, typography, intercultural

Introduction

The Hangul Project Collective embraces a significant historical responsibility, infused with the spirit of decolonization, while employing artistic and design expressions. Hangul, the unique script of Korea, was introduced in 1446 by King Sejong during the Joseon

Dynasty.¹ Designed on scientific phonetic principles, it features consonants shaped to mimic the vocal organs and vowels inspired by cosmological elements like heaven, earth, and humanity. This design allows for easy learning by people of all backgrounds. In the early 1900s, Korea's national identity and its language, Hangul, faced a serious threat from Japanese colonial rule², which aimed to replace it with Japanese in daily life, especially in social and educational settings, as part of an ethnocide strategy. In the spirit of decolonization, courageous Korean linguists and scholars risked severe consequences³, even death, as they covertly worked to preserve Hangul, leading to the language's continued survival and its beautiful preservation worldwide. The Hangul Project Collective aims to convey the intention of creating characters that are easy for everyone to learn, in line with King Sejong's vision. This effort seeks to promote Hangul widely, considering its historical significance as a symbol of resilience during times of resistance. In the contemporary world, Korean has secured its place as the 13th most spoken mother tongue globally.⁴ This achievement is closely linked to the widespread popularity of Korean culture, encompassing elements like K-pop, Korean literature, and the global recognition of the Hangul Project Collective, which serves as a testament to the profound spirit of resistance celebrated on a global scale.

¹“Hangul.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 21 Dec. 2023,

<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Hangul-Korean-alphabet/>

²“Korea under Japanese rule” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 21 Dec. 2023,

<https://www.britannica.com/place/Korea/Korea-under-Japanese-rule>

³“The Activities during the Japanese Colonial Era - 한글학회.” 한국가스협회, hangeul.or.kr/english_3. Accessed 9 Jan. 2024.

⁴Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS). “77.2 Million People Use Korean as Mother Tongue : Korea.Net : The Official Website of the Republic of Korea.” Korea.Net, www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Society/view?articleId=119391. Accessed 9 Jan. 2024.

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Hangul Alphabet – Typeface Specimen Digital Print, OpenType font file (OTF). Hangul Alphabet is an English typeface designed by using Korean consonants and vowels to highlight bi-lingual experience.



Figure 1: Lee, Taekyeom, “Hangul Alphabet – Typeface Specimen (2020)” ©Copyright by Taekyeom Lee

Hangul Alphabet Designed Products The products are created as extended design applications using 3D design and digital fabrication. The items would be distributable to the public as functional and playable objects with the Hangul Alphabet.



Figure 2: Lee, Taekyeom, “Hangul Alphabet Designed Products (2021)” ©Copyright by Taekyeom Lee

TYPE Portrait “TYPE Portrait” is a series of generative typography as self-portraits, which convey her response to her sense of invisibility as a woman of color. Ahn started this project in 2015 to raise awareness of Asian female faculty being isolated and marginalized in a predominantly white institution in America. Her works use diverse typefaces, including the typeface Hangul Alphabet. TYPE Portrait: Hangul Alphabet expresses her bilingual and bicultural identities utilizing the typeface as another art medium. Her works will address feelings and thoughts and show possibilities for using the typeface's personality for expressive and visually appealing generative selfies between Korean and American culture.

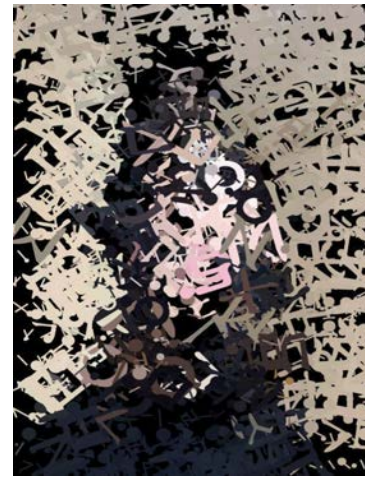


Figure 3: Ahn, Yeohyun, “TYPE Portrait (2015-2023)” ©Copyright by Yeohyun Ahn

Palpable Belongings “Palpable Belongings” is an artistic exploration of the tangible and the intangible, framed by the artist's personal narrative as a Korean immigrant in the United States. This installation weaves together the stories of three individuals bound by their Korean roots—the artist, her son, and her mother—through a harmonious blend of text, 3D objects, and ambient sounds to encapsulate their distinct journeys.

As a first-generation immigrant, the artist's journey is marked by the challenges of adapting to a new language and culture, forming new connections, and studying. Her speech, often interspersed with phrases like “like,” “umm,” “actually,” “generally,” carries the disfluency. This verbal habit, with their inherent disfluency, is reimagined into English letters with a Korean aesthetic, crafting a visual language that embodies the artist's bicultural linguistic identity. These letters are not just alphabetic representations but evolve into 3D shapes, each symbolizing different facets of her life in the United States. Accompanied by carefully curated sounds, these shapes transcend a multi-sensory experience that resonates with the artist's narrative.



Figure 4: Seo, Jinsil Hwaryoung, “Palpable Belongings”(2023) ©Copyright by Jinsil Hwaryoung Seo

Similarly, the artist portrays her son's life, a narrative contrasting her own. Born and raised in the United States by Korean parents, his narrative is a tapestry of cultures, with English at its core. This dichotomy is reflected in the installation, showcasing how his identity is shaped by his unique upbringing. Complementing this generational dialogue, the artist's mother introduces a profound connection to Korean heritage. Her presence, steeped in tradition and love, is an enduring tribute to her lineage. This dynamic is intricately woven into the installation, highlighting the intergenerational and cultural exchanges that shape their lives. In this immersive installation, the audience is invited to engage with soft hand sculptures on the pedestals. Upon contact, this interaction activates a kinetic display where cubed letters gracefully cascade toward the viewer, each accompanied by a distinctive ambient soundscape. This tactile engagement not only blurs the boundaries between the observer and the art but also enhances the multisensory experience.

"Palpable Belongings" becomes a narrative collage that invites viewers to experience the complex interplay of language, culture, and identity, as lived by a family bridging two worlds. This is the essence of the installation—a duality where physical artifacts and a sense of cultural belonging intertwine, reflecting the layered complexity of an immigrant's journey.

Mapping Multiculturalism: Conveying Bilingual and Transcontinental Experiences through Experimental Hangul Typography “The Map of the World” project explores the potential of the Hangul alphabet to express and communicate bilingual, transcontinental, and multicultural experiences through experimental typography and mapping. Taking inspiration from the concept of mapping and cartography, the project delves into the interplay between language, culture, and popular phenomena, weaving them into a unique fusion of typographic and cartographic representation.



Figure 5: Park, Yangbin, “The Map of the World (세계/world)” (2023) ©Copyright by Yangbin Park

The investigation focuses on the integration of cartography and mapping into the exploration of

bilingual, transcontinental, and multicultural experiences. Mapping serves as a central metaphor, much like cartographers map physical terrains; this project maps the intricate linguistic and cultural networks of bilingual and multicultural experiences. It unveils the overlapping landscapes of languages, the confluence of cultural currents, and the emergence of innovative hybrid territories in the realm of human expression. The project utilizes various media, including machine learning, graphic software, and printmaking. The process involves analyzing and generating novel typographic forms based on bilingual and multicultural text inputs with the assistance of generative AI and machine learning. Digital techniques are then employed to refine and manipulate these shapes. The final results are transformed into tangible prints, bringing the digital exploration into the physical realm, enhancing accessibility, and making the project more relatable. Generative AI was utilized to create hybrid typefaces by blending Hangul and the English alphabet, resulting in meaningful words such as "border," "space," and "world." Drawing inspiration from the Cheonhado—a circular world map originating from Korea in the 17th century—the reinterpretation of this ancient Korean map emphasizes the imaginative narratives inherent in cartography. Generative AI played a key role in envisioning fictional locales, which were then represented using these newly crafted hybrid characters. While "Cheonhado" translates to "Complete map of the world beneath the heavens," it embodies the imaginative essence of map-making and the cartographer's worldview. The reinterpretation of Cheonhado incorporates Korean terms, highlighting the multifaceted implications of cartographic perspectives and the human element in crafting narratives.

Remembrance Remembrance project represents an interdisciplinary project that offers a fresh and innovative perspective on dementia. It serves as a continuation of the foundational work, "Remembrance: Magma," which is a 3D animation featured within an immersive video installation. In "Remembrance: Coral," the artist takes on a dual role, acting as both the creative force and the participant in the project. This endeavor utilizes Electroencephalography (EEG) input as both a technological medium and a metaphor for the transient nature of memory. The animations from "Magma" undergo a transformation into an interactive video game to eliminate preset animations and facilitate interactive transitions. What sets "Remembrance: Coral" apart is the integration of the artist's own brain waves, captured via EEG electrodes, to steer the narrative of the game. During live streaming shows on Zoom, fluctuations in the artist's concentration exert an influence on the gaming experience, creating a dynamic and immersive interaction. These brain waves are classified into 'concentrated' and 'not

concentrated' states, introducing a sense of urgency to the narrative. Focused attention allows the unfolding of the story, providing a profound exploration of the intricate facets of Alzheimer's.

Conversely, lapses in concentration symbolically lead to the disintegration of visual elements, vividly portraying the unpredictable impact of the disease on memory. The project also includes the Hangul alphabet font, symbolizing Korean identity in a global context. This thematic element is skillfully conveyed through visuals, and the immersive nature of the project encourages viewers to confront their fears within a public setting. Through this approach, the artist delves deep into the intricate facets of Alzheimer's while reclaiming identity and agency, emerging from the shadows of the family's medical history.

As dementia gradually erases a person's memory, the brain persistently continues its quest for data collection. The Remembrance project poses a profound and thought-provoking question: What do individuals become as this process unfolds? This project challenges conventional perspectives on dementia and offers a unique exploration of its philosophical and relational dimensions, collectively reshaping our comprehension of this complex condition.



Figure 6: Choi, Chane, "Remembrance: Coral" (2023)
©Copyright by Chane Choi

Conclusions

The Hangul Project Collective's journey with the Hangul Alphabet Art Project extends beyond the borders of visual languages or narratives between English and Korean bilingually or trans-culturally. Our mission is in alignment with King Sejong's vision, emphasizing the importance of making Hangul characters accessible to all. We hold deep respect for all languages and acknowledge the historical significance of Hangul as a symbol of resilience during times of resistance. Once marginalized and on the verge of disappearing, along with our culture, Hangul has, in recent decades, transcended the shadows of colonization and begun to flourish on the international stage, becoming an integral part of Korean culture. In today's modern world, marked by the widespread popularity of Korean culture, including K-pop and Korean literature among the

Korean-speaking population in the US.⁵ The Hangul Alphabet Collective continues to extend its global influence. As designers and artists, we deeply value the importance of language and hold all languages in high regard. We are dedicated to preserving Hangul alongside other languages. Our primary goal is to consistently visually represent Hangul, engage the senses, and promote it extensively through various exhibitions and collaborations with scholars from around the world.

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The Hangul Project, in collaboration with the Hangul Alphabet Collective, conducts research into the realm of bilingual experiences bridging English and Korean, utilizing experiential typographic forms and narratives. The establishment of the Hangul Project Collective was guided by Founding Director Yeohyun Ahn, with Co-Director Taekyeom Lee's notable contribution in providing the Hangul Alphabet Typeface Specimen. Our current team is composed of Chane Choi as the Creative Director and Shinyeon Jeon as the Craft Coordinator & Senior Fellow, alongside a dedicated group of additional contributors. The efforts of the Hangul Project Collective have been showcased at prestigious events, including the Digitally Engaged Learning (DEL) Conference in 2023 held in London, England, the Virtual Design Education Forum, and TypeCon. We are pleased to announce our forthcoming presentation at the 111th College Art Association Conference in 2024, scheduled to take place in Chicago, IL. Furthermore, our collective was awarded a Seed Grant from the Global Engagement Office within the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2022.

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