

THE WORD

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VERTICAL BOOKS
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PPAPER
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But today Ahn Sang-soo is a pop star. *Idea Magazine* calls him “the most innovative designer in contemporary Korea.” (It is presumably due to space constraints that they list him as only a designer, and not a poet/philosopher/humorist/linguist/choreographer/scholar/teacher.) I first interviewed Ahn for *Graphis* magazine in 1999 and have had the pleasure of following him and his work, when I could keep up, for the past seven years.

Like other Asian designers, early on Ahn thought of English-inspired western design as ideal. But when he discovered the beauty of *Hangul*, he became who he is today: a typographer obsessed with his language. At 54, he has gone through several phases of huge fame and success, and a short, critical time without big clients, during which he recognized that the written language of Korea would be his life’s work. He founded Ahn Graphics (design firm and multimedia, advertising, and publishing house), and teaches typography at Hong-Ik University. When he has the money, two or three times a year, he publishes 500 to 1,000 copies of an art/culture magazine, *bogoseo/bogoseo* (“report/report”), where his editorial imagination takes wing, inspiring an entire industry. As a souvenir, I received a vase Ahn had made, of course bearing letters, brushed in indigo: ㄴ □.

I also took home several of his outrageous, outstanding posters, for which he developed the first ever “out-of-frame” *Hangul* typeface, called Ahn Sang-soo, and became known as the leader of *Hangul*’s type revolution. Ahn designed them to release his language from the “square prison” in which *Hangul* had been confined since its birth, the invisible box of Chinese characters, and created an uproar. One of his fonts is

named after his favorite poet, the experimental Dadaist I-Sang (1910–1937). They all deliberately alter the density of the letters to engage the eye just like a dancer, while still keeping them readable.

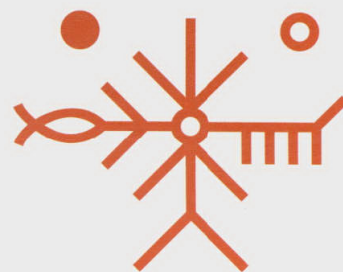
His typefaces regularly appear on posters for national events, and his out-of-frame fonts are heavily imitated in all kinds of media. This is because Ahn is the first and only graphic designer, if we have to call him that, who has identified the history and position of Korea’s written language. He has continually explored and championed its possibilities formally, with experimental typography, and functionally, researching for example, improving typography in middle school textbooks (work commissioned by the Educational Development Institute) and the readability of newspaper typefaces (winning him a Korea Newspaper Award).

Hangul is unique in the world, being the only language whose origins are completely clear. King Sejong formally promulgated the new phonetic script in 1446 in a little book called *Correct Sounds for Teaching the People*. In 1940, a royal document was discovered that clarified the thought behind the shapes of the letters. With what Columbia University’s Korean Studies Professor Dr. Gari Ledyard calls “unparalleled grammatical luxury,” each letter is part of a systematic *illustration* of the shape the mouth, tongue, teeth lips, and glottis take in making the sounds. As the five basic consonants grow in strength (NA, for example becomes DA, TA, and finally DDA), their forms are increased by one stroke at a time. Ingenious.

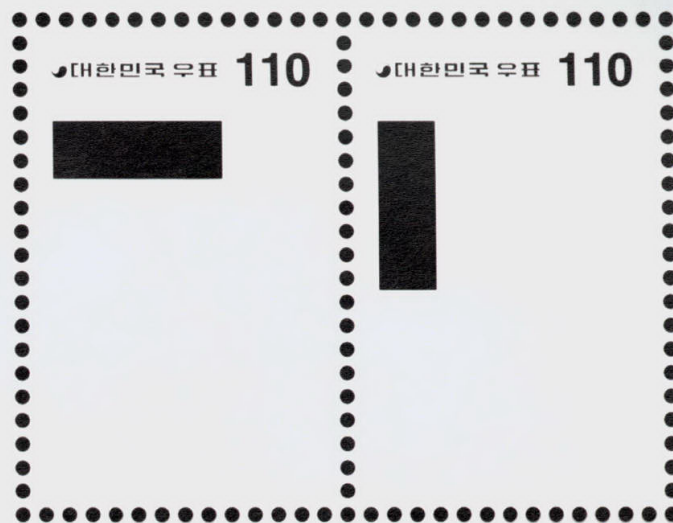
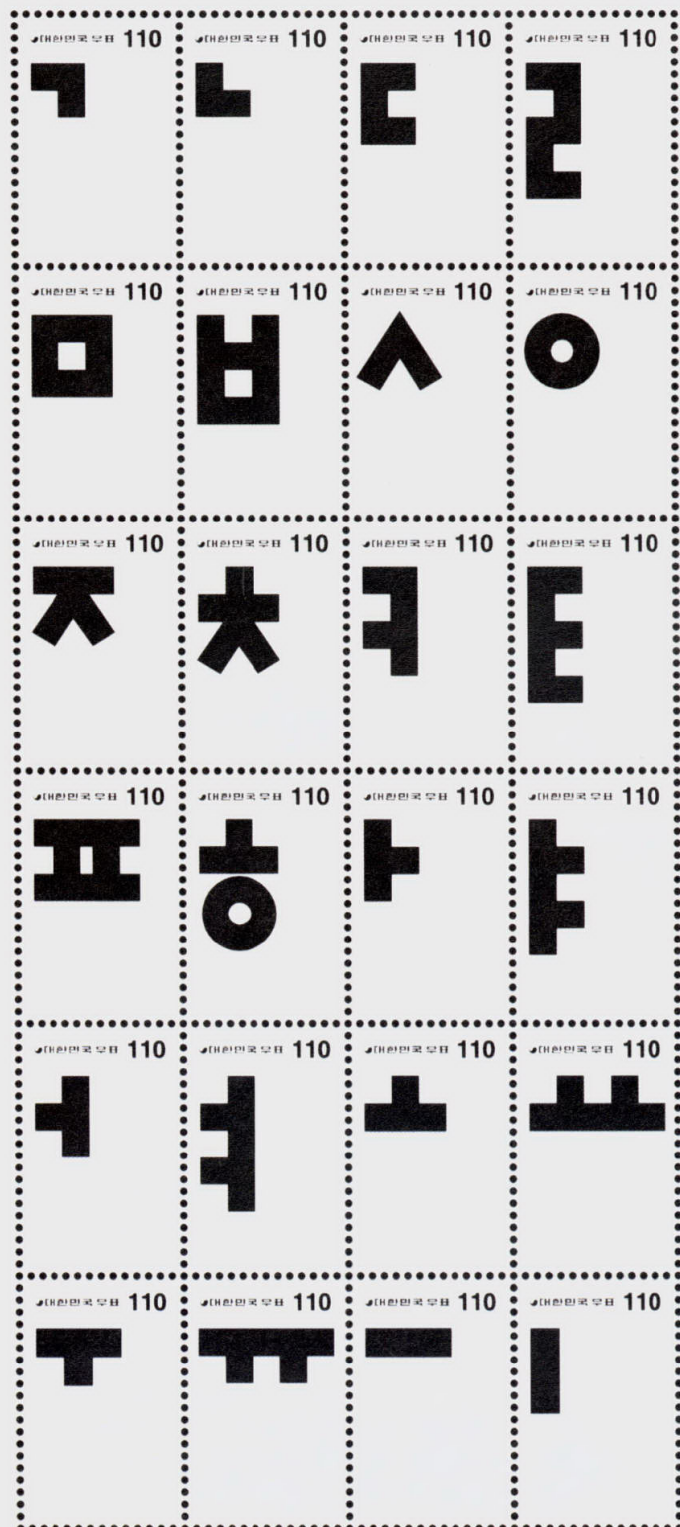
ㄴ ㄷ ㅌ ㄸ

NA DA TA DDA

The vowels, on the other hand, are made up of three elements relating to nature: a dot (heaven), a horizontal stroke (earth), and a vertical stroke (human). The only written language ever consciously “designed” to follow the physiology of speech, *Hangul* has only five formal elements, making it clear to anyone who’s ever seen it that it is the simplest writing system in the world: dot, vertical stroke, horizontal stroke, diagonal stroke, circle.



Uniqueness aside, *Hangul* is by no means secure in its position as the language of his country, a fact that perhaps sheds some light on Ahn’s passion. With *Hangul*, King Sejong replaced modified Chinese ideographic characters that have no relation to spoken Korean. He wanted to give common people a way to write their own language and to read the Chinese classics. But because the invention is so recent, and was so decidedly interrupted by the Japanese occupation (1910–1945), when Korean and *Hangul* were nearly eradicated, going back to Chinese characters is still considered an option. Teaching them in elementary school went out just 30 years ago. Even today, most South Korean dailies still use a mixed script of Chinese characters and *Hangul*. Threatening *Hangul* on the other side is English, the dominant language on the



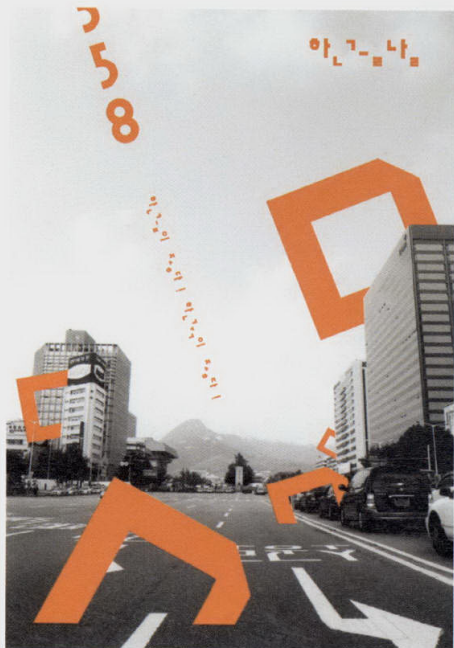
HANGUL STAMP DESIGN PROPOSAL



internet, which cannot be wholly ignored in the world's most wired country.

Ahn Sang-soo is fully aware of his darling's precarious position. But he has also become familiar, through deliberate and ongoing study, with its beginnings, history, "modernist" beauty, and possibilities. For him, *Hangul* is foremost a symbol of Korea's cultural independence—from China, Japan, and the Western world—and he is a tireless educator. He not only curates exhibitions large and small (like "Hangul-Dada"), designs posters and logos for exhibitions, performances, corporations, and NGOs (like Life Peace Organization) but also lectures around the world. Often he promulgates linguists' claim that *Hangul* can save the dying spoken languages of small tribes, because with 14 consonants and 10 vowels, it can express almost any sound, and be learned in mere hours.

The problem for a designer in the 21st century comes when trying to create a typeface, because *Hangul*'s five simple elements combine into more than 10,000 characters. Ahn first took *Hangul* out of the invisible box not only to challenge the Chinese aesthetic, but also to make it possible to move its elements around at will, which is especially important on a computer; Ahn was one of the early and fanatic users. Ahn calls his typographic efforts "working/unpacking *Hangul*." He alternately makes the letters "work" harder than is normal (by positioning them so as to pile on more and more meaning) and "unburdens" them of all meaning.



top BOMB FISH ON THE SEASHORE
left POSTER FOR THE 558TH HANGUL DAY

Ahn's fonts today are used mostly in posters and as headlines. As body text, they stretch the boundaries of legibility. But Ahn Sang-soo isn't always interested in being understood. He is also a poet. About his calendars, in which *Hangul* letters are arranged into patterns, and the connection between the letters and the patterns is not always clear, he writes,

when i design them it feels like i am
writing poetry.
it is in that spirit that I work.
in some ways, i am a poet in a
visual medium.
Everything is possible when i design
with Hangul as separate elements. [sic]

As an international interpreter of his work and his language, a deep thinker curious about the rest of the world, and by far the most visible Korean designer/typographer there is, Ahn is so widely traveled that he's sometimes hard to nail down. This makes a reporter feel intrusive and Ahn seem elusive.

How curiously Ahn speaks online, with periods in between all of his words, and no more information than absolutely necessary. Sometimes his replies are orderly, like Christmas trees.

dear.maggie.
happy.new.2000.
happy.to.hear.from.you.
happy.to.have.questions.

Questions, yes, there are many. Often Ahn chooses to reply to one, but not another. No answer is also an answer. We move away from big questions begging for analytical answers. On Ahn's website (<http://www.ssahn.com>) there are more than 1000 photos of

people covering one eye, as on the first cover of *bogoseo* (1988). I ask a simple one. "What's that about?"

one. eye.
no. meaning.
just. fun.

Of course, as he pointed out,

i. am. in. ukraine.
internet. is. inconvenient. [sic]

i. am. leaving. for. basel.
i. will. let. you. know.

ahn,
kiev.

He was busy.

He was judging the VI International Triennial of Eco Poster 4th Block, "Chernobyl. 20 Years After." (<http://www.4block.org>) So we spoke by phone, New York in the morning, Seoul at night. In one of the most genuine, and yet most disconnected, interviews I've ever experienced, Ahn introduced me to many nuanced layers of communication and technology. Surrounded by examples of both his over-"worked" and completely "unpacked" typography, I began to suspect him of engineering our continuing conversation to have the same texture of unpredictability. I called him at a time agreed upon by e-mail. There was no answer. The cell phone rang. It was Ahn. I called back at the same number. No answer. Finally the land line rings. We begin the questions. Ahn Sang-soo pulls apart words and letters. Some images he creates just to revel in the shapes and patterns, while some, like the 20th anniversary Ahn Graphics logo, can be decoded... if Ahn gives away the code. Ahn had wanted to IM with the interviewer but settled for email, Googling facts, trading scanned images, uploading and downloading films. He sent documents

and poetry. Or was that an explanation? It was hard to tell. I recorded. Yet even technology could not erase that sensation of speaking with a psychic. A cryptic psychic with a mischievous sense of humor. Ahn calls *Hangul* the teenager in the family of world languages, full of possibilities, and sometimes a troublemaker. Likewise Ahn.

Sharing hours with this typographer of a script not yet matured into an irrefutable form brought me to an understanding of Ahn's world view, in which an event of centuries ago can be vital, and a designer can be a poet can be an artist can be a choreographer can make people think about language. All of Ahn's typography tugs at the boundaries of conformity, pulling apart not only the individual letters, but spreading words around the page to entice the brain to decipher the meaning, assuming there is one. Sometimes there isn't (a photo of a Cyclops?) but sometimes it's too thick to contemplate in one go. I asked him about the potent *Bomb Fish on the Seashore* poster for the "Front DMZ Arts Movement Exhibition" (1991). Our conversation, in which he used bold Verdana, not Monaco, as usual—I wonder why...went like this:

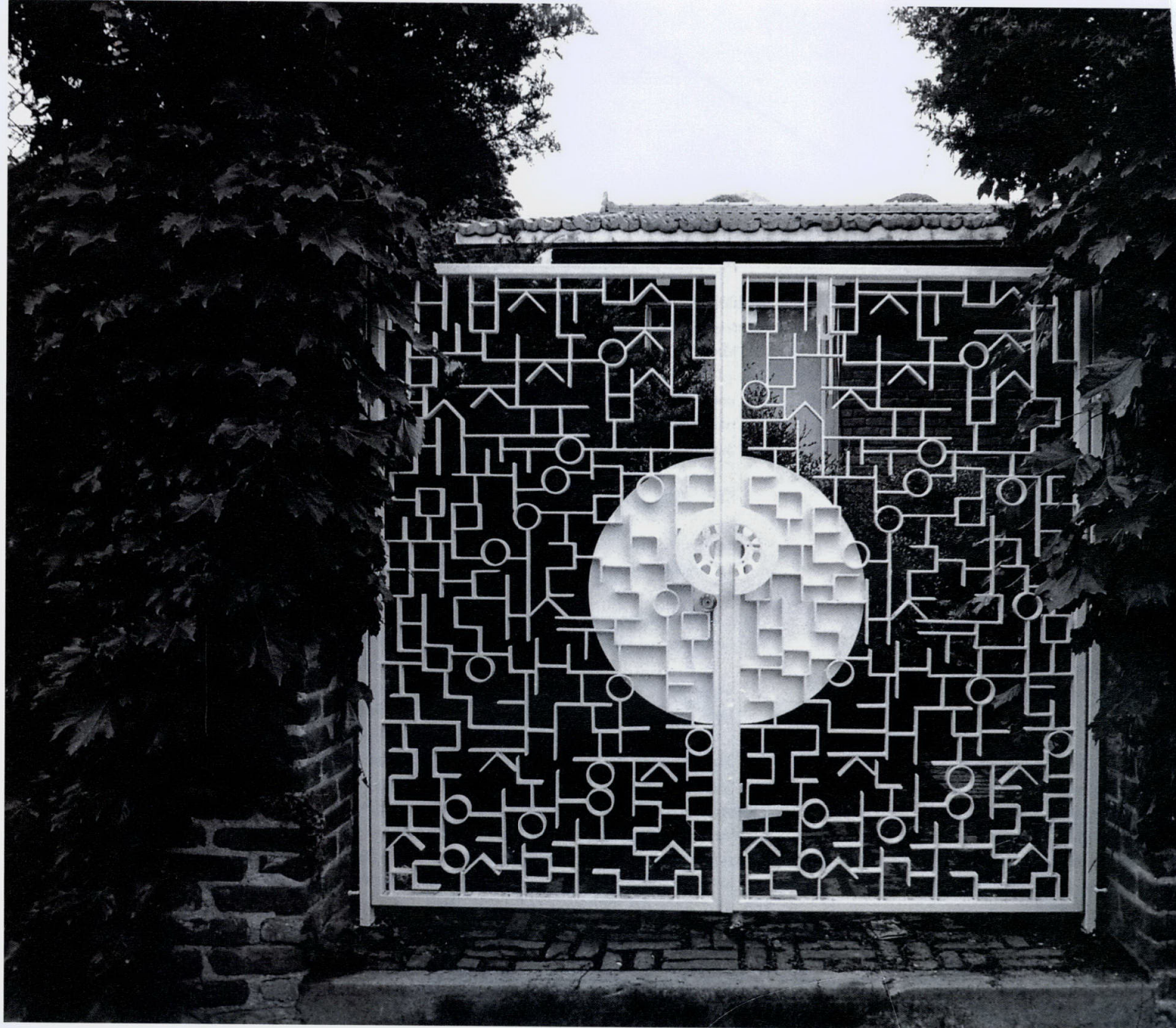
What are these bomb-fishes?
dummy-bombs.
looks.like.dead.fishes.

Where did they come from?
from.the.airplane.
for.bombing.exercise.

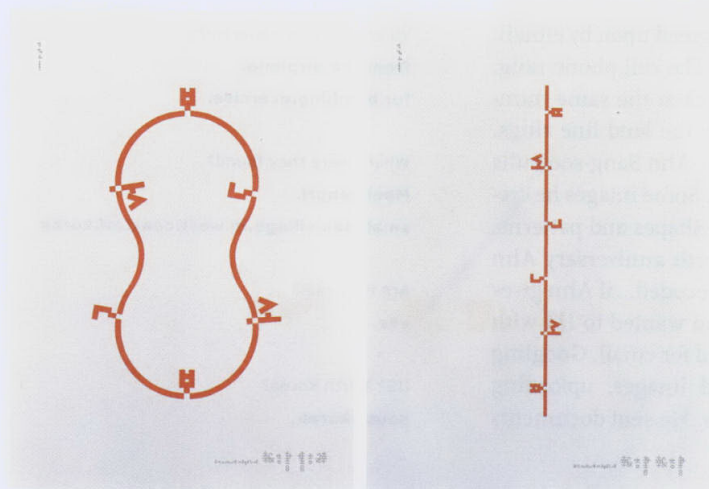
Where were they found?
Maehyangri.
small.sea.village.in.west.coast.of.korea

Are they real?
yes.

US? North Korea?
south.korea.



top HANGUL GATE, AHN SANG-SOO'S HOME
left BOSOGEO/BOSOGEO LOGOS



Ahn calls this “a poster with non-decipherable text placed on a non-believable photo for a non-understandable situation.”

I suggested that he was very serious. He laughed, quietly.

Roman letter typefaces, when presented by their designers, appear as the alphabet in order. *Hangul* has 24 letters, but Ahn chose words with meaning for the faces I-Sang and Mano.

They are verses of common children’s songs in Korea, taught early by parents, and sung in elementary school.

*In the early morning, with light rains,
Go three umbrellas.
Red umbrella, blue umbrella, and torn
umbrella
In the small alley to the school,
There are three umbrellas.
Head to head they are walking.*

—•—
*Blue heaven, Milky Way, and in the small
white ship,
There is a single tree, and there is a rabbit.
Without mast and sails, without oars,
It sails fluently, softly, beautifully to the
West.*

*Across the Milky Way, to the land of clouds,
Beyond the land of clouds, where are we
sailing?
To far away; there is some twinkling.
That’s the lighthouse to Venus. You will
find the way.*

“Why,” I asked Ahn, “did you use these particular verses to illustrate these fonts?”

“It means nothing,” he said, a smile in his voice. ☸

POSTER FOR THE BALLET
DON QUIXOTE

