

Myung Mi Kim's Penultimate Poem Face-to-facing
Cerith Wyn Evans's Illuminated Language

Megan MacDonald

Martin Heidegger once wrote about the work of Paul Klee: "Something never seen before is visible in these paintings." If we keep in mind the limits of language to present an image as an image, can we then explore Myung Mi Kim's poetic languages as they approach something like an imaged or imagined language? I propose to do this through a discussion of Kim's work in tandem with Cerith Wyn Evans's language-art installations. In tracing Myung Mi Kim's languages between her works *Dura*, *Commons*, and *River Antes*, we arrive at what I am calling her 'penultimate' poem in *River Antes*: a poem that looks for words as a translation, as punctuation. While Kim's penultimate poem begs to be seen, or unseen, Wyn Evans's wall signage asks to be read, rather than imaged. At stake in Wyn Evans's work is both art and language. He languages art, literally forging words out of metal and light. This essay will focus specifically on his neon word installations and 'arrive' at his "Chandelier" pieces. His titles in these neon installations are written on the wall: the title is the artwork. The artwork is language, is a title, a naming. What does Wyn Evans's work do to language-as-art, or art-as-language? What is at stake here is the very nature of looking. What would it mean to read Wyn Evans as poetry and 'see' Kim's work as art installation?

How do we see here? Gadamer's notion that

“Being that can be understood is language,” offers us a glimpse sideward, a promise that posits Being, or language, as something that could possibly be understood. Perhaps we could look at art as Being that cannot be understood, but experienced. This “ah ha” or eureka moment manifests itself as a silence, but a very full silence. This notion of seeing the work of art escapes the languaging we do of art, when we try to ‘explain’ it with words. The gaze here is a kind of *déjà vécu* moment, one that paradoxically has not yet been lived. It is a backwards experience of a to-be future. This possibility of “ah ha” is similar to Heidegger’s notion of *Ereignis*, or the Event, but Heidegger would not go so far to say that we could prepare ourselves for the Event. Heidegger’s notions of language and the Event in *On the Way to Language* will inform the possibility of an intersection between the two writer-artists. Visually and conceptually, Kim and Wyn Evans form a dialogue of silence, a dangerous dialogue. In “A Dialogue on Language” Heidegger’s dialogue partner (described as ‘a Japanese’) offers: “Now I am beginning to understand better where you smell the danger. The language of the dialogue constantly destroyed the possibility of saying what the dialogue was about” (“Dialogue,” 5).

In this essay I will endeavor to locate *possibilities* of “what the dialogue was about” in Kim’s work, using Wyn Evans as a kind of backdrop or sounding board, a site of words that calls itself ‘art’ rather than poetry. Kim and Wyn Evans intersect curiously here: Wyn Evans’s visual art (and he also employs sound) is to be “looked at”

as an image, and to be “read” as writing. Kim’s poetry is to be “read” where seeing is reading. Do both Kim and Wyn Evans subvert our preconceived notions of what is called art and what is called poetry? What is at stake in naming one poetry and one art? Heidegger’s notion of language and *Ereignis* serve as signposts on the way to writing about Kim’s work; her notions of naming and categorizing serve to unseat notions of what art and poetry could or should be, leaving us with the “possibility” of listening of and with language, in the “neighborhood” of Kim’s work. Kim demands that as readers we “look” again. If visually and conceptually Kim and Wyn Evans form a dialogue, then each dialogue is a kind of monologue, as Heidegger writes: “language speaks solely and solitarily with itself” (“Way to Language,” 397). If this is true, then the poetry and the art serve as “obstacles” to arriving (“Way to Language,” 398). He continues, “Yet language *is* monologue. This now says something twofold: it is language *alone* that properly speaks; and it speaks in *solitude*” (“Way to Language,” 423). Since it is language that speaks “properly”, our job is to pay attention to it, listening to “the unspoken” and “silence” wherein the “noiseless ringing of stillness” the saying “shows” (“Way to Language,” 420).

Kim’s poetry “shows” us language via notation, ordering, spacing language and punctuation, leaving us with words and signs, as we try “absorbing those little pointed black splinters we call words” (Sartre, “The Objective Spirit,” 229). Her work offers black marks on a white page. Wyn Evans offers: white marks in neon on

a white wall (“Time here becomes space Space here becomes time” (2004)); blacked-out white neon on a white wall (“eclipse” (2005)); and white neon on a black wall, one in shadow (“Think of this as a window” (2005) and “...in which something happens all over again for the very first time.” (2006)). Kim interpellates an anxious reader, one who wants to throw down more ink on the page, to *turn* these marks into words, make them *intelligible*. This reader is asked to render possibilities out of punctuation, romanized and *hangul* script versions of Korean, and “English” words. Kim writes of the “Social and psychic identifications that disrupt and (re)envision, to throw into question / conventions of codifying” (*Commons*, 108). Letting happen is disruption and uncoding.

Accessing Wyn Evans’s work in the print format is problematic. His artwork, like language, travels. It is site-specific. The particular exhibition catalogue that I am using as a reference is the traveling book version, the ‘reminder’ of the visual and written. It is a book full of words, more word than image. Can the two be separated? We follow objects, carrying them, as the word “metaphor” suggests: we carry them across. Could the Event then require carrying history as an object, as language within the *possibility* of an experience with language, a kind of prerequisite that is *not* a preparation? Heidegger would not call this ‘carrying,’ per se, but “submitting”: “To undergo an experience with language, then, means to let ourselves be properly concerned by the claim of language by entering into and submitting to it” (“Nature,” 57). “Submitting” in German is *fugen*, which

means “fitting” ourselves to it. Approaching Wyn Evans in a location he intended for his work to be displayed, what we are confronted with as spectators there is what we submit or “fit” ourselves to; this is different than the nature of the looking when “reading” the works in a book. The book is portable, the site of it, language, the words, the light—metaphor, carrying it across—is this a subversion of the artwork? We carry the book; we translate it with our dis/placed or mis/placed gaze, now aerial, a bird’s eye view rather than face-to-face. But with the book, Wyn Evans’s words are then where words ‘belong’—in the book. Instead of “entering into” the gallery space, we enter with our eyes, the head-first plunge. What if we were to then put Myung Mi Kim on the wall?

While we are face-to-face with Kim’s poetry in book form, the page transferred to a wall and labeled ‘art’ may change our way of ‘reading’ it; we may ‘expect’ less of it on the wall, allow it more room to breathe, and ‘say’ what it intends to say. It would then not be limited to our label of poetry, a constricting one. Heidegger writes that being mindful of language is to be near it, or in the ‘neighborhood’ of language: “Neighborhood, then, is a relation resulting from the fact that the one settles face to face with the other” (“Nature,” 82). Kim and Wyn Evans ‘face’ us with language, with the image of language, the ‘fact’ of written words, and the approximation of language through symbols. These are both an art and a poetry that think about language, that ask us to “fit” or “submit” to their conception of

language, in order to come near or towards a *possibility* of language. Heidegger cautions: “the nearness which prevails in the neighborhood does not depend on space and time considered as parameters” (“Nature,” 103). Facing is revisited: “Yet being face-to-face with one another has a more distant origin; it originates in that distance where earth and sky, the god and man reach one another” (Heidegger, “Nature,” 104). Kim’s “Cosmography” in *Dura* is recalled, her specific mapping of earth and sky, of origins and words. We then see ourselves in language: “We catch a glimpse of the essence of language only to the extent that we ourselves are envisaged by it, remanded to it” (Heidegger, “Way to Language,” 423). “Envisage” means to look in the face of, to look straight at, obtain a mental view of, set before the mind’s eye, or contemplate. The etymology serves to interpellate us to language, to its “essence” but only a “glimpse”—for we are then “remanded.” “Remanded” is to send something back to a place, to reconsign or remit. But it can also mean to refer someone back to a passage in a book. We are faced with the book, at the bottom of the well, collecting language and books in buckets, hoping for potable or useful sources of communication for transmission and digestion, and missing the “essence.” We are always starting over, unseeing and unlistening.

Even if we are not listening, language is still mindful: “it is needful that language vouchsafe itself to us” (Heidegger, “Nature,” 72). Language is prepared to bear itself, sustain itself, become metaphor and carry itself. Kim has prepared us for this, weighing down the

page with both “black splinters” and white silences. In *River Antes*, Kim finds favor with black splinters and holes, peopling her poem with punctuation and white space: the single backslash, pairs of backslashes, and the period. Language then flaunts its undecidability with a rejection of nouns. In his “Chandelier” pieces, Cerith Wyn Evans trades back-lit words for lights themselves: a computer program selects texts that he has input, and these are then ‘translated’ into Morse code, which is indicated by the flashing of physical chandeliers in a room. Kim’s Morse code is not unlike a binary code. She asks us to be “seers” or see-ers and challenges a reading. What would it mean to ‘read’ this notation, and how would we do it? Could we read it line by line? Could we distinguish between:

/. //

and

// // //

There are no page numbers in *River Antes*. Several poems are located in fold-out sections entitled: / [line break] /. // [period]. Here Kim requires that talking about these sections or writing them necessitates an attention to punctuation, asks punctuation to spell itself out, in order to avoid confusion or conflation with her title. The fold-out locations are triptychs, this poem holding the central panel as its place. Seriality is per-

formed and rejected: tripartite sets and variables do not match; copies are illusive; triumvirates uncertain. This poem's title is undecidable. It could be: / / or perhaps, / / (line break) / / / / /. It resists labeling, titling. For the purposes of this paper, I will call it (with hesitation) the "penultimate" poem in *River Antes*. Penultimate works on several levels. It is the second to last poem, a kind of pen/ultimate, or ultimate pen-stroke, or key stroke. The 'second last' move. In grammar, penultimate refers to syllables and poetic feet. Is there movement here or rest? We can trace a line from top to bottom, one that winds and squiggles, one that moves up and down with single backslashes, and moves horizontally in pairs of backslashes, recalling Kim's *coda* from *Commons*: "A line's shape, vector, and motion interpolates perception and meter" (111). The poem is a snake, a body, rope, a dancer, a series of holes. Can we attempt a reading or, heeding Walter Benjamin, a *translation* of this poem? By naming it I have already translated it. Benjamin writes that, "the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them" (71). Are these marks to be considered repetition? They resonate more on the level of a single image, one that you 'read' with your eyes, the marks directing you from top to bottom, with little deviations from the center to either side. This poem elides any naming practice, shuns the *pater familias* for a different claim: the possibility for the experience of language as sign system that cannot be decided, or taken as-read at a glance.

“The necessity of carving out [intuiting/enacting] one’s own treatment of a particular / arena of language” (*Commons*, 108) is written by Kim not only about poetry, but perhaps all writing, and more specifically what Hélène Cixous would term a “l’écriture féminine” (Cixous is also quoted in the *coda* to *Commons*). Heidegger calls the “rift-design” (*Der Aufriss*) the “unity in the essence of language” (Heidegger, “Way to Language,” 407). Rift in German is *Riss* and *ritzen* is to notch or carve. Kim’s gesture is to forge her own carving tool to inscribe the proverbial notches of language or otherwise. The gesture on the page is always making a break. The black marks in the “penultimate poem” indicate a documentation or witness of language: Kim ‘notches’ a kind of “I was here” or “this happened” on this page, cleaving to and away from the white space, much like “drawing furrows through” a snow covered field (Heidegger, “Way to Language,” 408).

Wyn Evans’s “Chandeliers” happen in time, but leave no trace. The lights blink, and only ‘speak’ an intelligible language if viewers confront the wall texts: romanized Morse code (the original ‘text’), and Morse code. Do we experience the silent speaking of these chandeliers as a ‘language’—and is it an accessible ‘translation’ from the original? Revisiting Kim’s romanization, in *Commons*: what is at stake in getting the “//” “/” and “.” right? Is this any more or less intelligible to a reader who does not ‘see’ meaning in *hangul*, and yet trusts or knows that it is meaning furled and coiled.

“Of a sudden, we are awakening from the slum-

ber of hastily formed opinions, and are struck by the sign of something other” (Heidegger, “Nature of Language,” 87). Kim’s poem offers us something other, but is it *Saying?* We sidle up to her poetry and her corp/us cautiously, and when we arrive at the penultimate poem, the saying ends at ‘looking’, rather than ‘deciding.’ The corp/us, or female body and female writing, are both at stake here. The ‘us’ of the ‘corp’ or ‘corps’ is signaled. Kim’s punctuation punctuates and punctures, a series of holes and slashes—but not *reducible* to a body gendered female. The dot/dash of Wyn Evans’s Morse code read through Kim becomes period (dot)/slash (dash). Gendered female, this could be read as female punctuation in the time-space of the body, where the punctuation mark ‘period’ is writ menstrual, the slash is then vaginal, and the “penultimate” poem is the ultimate pen stroke: keeping track of circular body rhythms, avoiding phallogocentric notions of the Event. The body is then binary, opened and closed. Kim performs the way-making in a bodily manner, cleaving to and cleaving away from. Engaged poetically, we arrive at the penultimate poem then as a bodily possibility, one that cannot be thought, but can be lived, and not anticipated.

We could define Kim negatively, describe what she is not doing: she is not putting down letters or numbers here. The importance is the unsaid: we need to listen next to, in the “nearness” or “neighborhood” of Kim’s tracing. Wyn Evans’ neon-lighting and chandelier flickerings depend on electricity, vibrate anxiously as language and with computer-mediated language. His

words get turned off when the lights go off and the 'site' closes. His language stops languaging. His palimpsest can only be off or on, the off switch offering lit remainders burned into our brain for a few seconds when the gallery closes.

At the end of his essay "The Way to Language," Heidegger quotes Wilhelm von Humboldt on language: "A people could through inner illumination and propitious external circumstances devise such a different form for the language it has inherited that it would thereby become a wholly different language, a new language" (425). On some level this is inconceivable for Heidegger, he literally cannot give birth to this new language. Kim's space in "l'écriture féminine" leaves traces of its own de/sign, pointing at the remote and impossible in a language that is too often written as male/heterosexual and white/western. If the Event is in or of language, then the Event is gendered. Kim would then reject the phallogocentric event. This translating and re-naming that Kim performs could perhaps be aligned with female responsibility and naming, documenting and bearing witness, or at least she is writing in this "neighborhood." Her series of flagstones listens to her languages, sets up her well, looks for *Hörren* to create her own *Gehörren*, one where she sees herself in the well's reflection, in the vibrating silences. After all, Heidegger reminds us in "Words" that we are not 'looking' to "solve" language, but to "gather our thoughts about it," for it is "mystery" (150; 154).