stal The Mino Taur Selected Works of Bill Keith

Stalking The Minotauk

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Edited & designed by Igor Satanovsky



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Forewords

THE POLYPOET BILL KEITH

Initially a painter, long a photographer as well as a poet, Keith has produced in *Stalking The Minotaur* a rich collection of poetries discernably different from what others are doing and have done. I say "poetries," because, always meticulous and always clever, he has written visual poetry, typographic poetry, picto poetry, abstract poems, pattern poems, poster poetry, prose poetry, skinny poetry, modular poetry, minimal poetry, "wee poems" (as he calls them), among other genres still waiting for a name. He is a plural poet, if not a polypoet, in the sense of excelling at several kinds of writing, much as the Polyartist excels at more than one nonadjacent art.

The variety of Keith's alternative work, along with his reluctance to repeat original moves, makes him the rival of the late Ernst Jandl, the Austrian polypoet who was only a few years older than Keith, but far more visible for many years. Barely visible though Bill Keith's poetry has been so far, mark my prediction that it will be reprinted for as long as anthologies of experimental and/or African-American writings are made.

Don't be fooled by rumors that the "art world" is moving to Beacon, New York, upriver from the City, to be with the Dia Foundation, for Dia relocated to Beacon to imbibe the genuine genius of Bill Keith, who got here first—geographically as well as poetically.

Richard Kostelanetz

SOME NOTES ON THE CORE-CONSCIOUSNESS AND SUNDRY OTHER VIRTUES OF BILL KEITH

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But they are permanences, too – as are his explorations of the visio-aesthetic possibilities of pure typography, and other mixtures of the textual and the visual included in this collection. When Crag Hill and I, with input from a number of others in the field, considered whom to include in the first volume of our anthology. Writing To Be Seen, as the most important dozen American visio-textual artists currently active, there was never any question as to whether Keith would be in it. For one thing, he is a master of graphic design. Added to that is a "core-consciousness" which causes him near-constantly to organize his poems commandingly around one of existence's final values-flight, for instance, or the alphabet, or poetry, itself. He is also vibrantly receptive to all that is going on – and has gone on – in visio-textual art, and willing to use material from Cummings to Kempton, and to even more recent poets I don't know about. As possibly the only significant African-American visual poet in all of the U.S. (alas), he is able to add flavors ethno-uniquely his to his work, as well. See, for instance, his "Wee Poems" (page 34) and "Blues" (page 25). He is, however, the opposite of parochial, so his poems are far more often trans-ethnic than black.

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ems,

As the reader will see, a specialty of Keith's is the kind of narrow poem that I imitated at the start of this commentary. A key element of such poems is what I term the "intra-syllabic line-break," which—so far as I've been able to determine, was invented by E.E. Cummings. This allows the words of a poem to say extra things, as "come forth" in Bill's charming "all language poetic" (page 13), quite directly says, "comfort" ("come/fort"). It also slows the eye, allowing the poem more time to trip its reader beyond the mere words on the page into the full sensuality of the images and moods they are entrances into. But, in making his narrow poems precise rectangles (or, less frequently, other geometric shapes such as triangles), something Cummings did not do, Keith can also use

them as blocks in never-too-representational pictures that add to their expressive value, as in his wonderfully simple/complex "quest" (page 11). Another thing Keith does by making his narrow poems as geometric as he does, is give them an abstract, anti-emotional flavor that acts like dissonance to mitigate any tilt his poems may have toward sentimentality—as, again, in "all language poetic." Or didacticism, another "flaw" in poetry that Keith is confident enough to often risk. See, for instance, "Flying Machine," on page 17. Finally, by accustoming a reader to his rectangles and the like, he can all the better surprise him with variations like the waves of "african design" (page 47) or the amazing evocation of African tribal dances in the untitled pattern-poem on page 49.

A second quickly apparent specialty of Keith's is the textual illumage—or visual artwork consisting entirely or mainly of typography sans words. These tend to be as unusually expansive as his narrow poems are unusually condensed. A memorable example, for me, is the sophisticated pattern of stenciled x's and z's on page 24, and the variations on it 3 and 4 pages later. Then there is the remarkable combination of Egyptian graphics and the same kind of stenciled letters in the piece on page 36 that I frankly can't yet understand, but find extremely appealing viscerally. Ditto the related illumage on page 43. Egypt, needless to say, is a continuing source of inspiration for Keith, more so, I would say, than sub-Saharan Africa, although that is important to him, too.

I could go on about Keith's work for several pages more, but I think I've said enough, for now. So, reader, it's time for the main course: go to it!

Ther e is no w ay y ou w on't love it!

Bob Grumman, 15 June 2003

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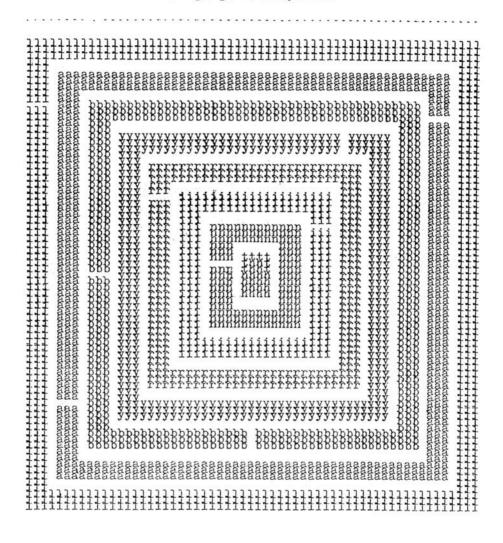
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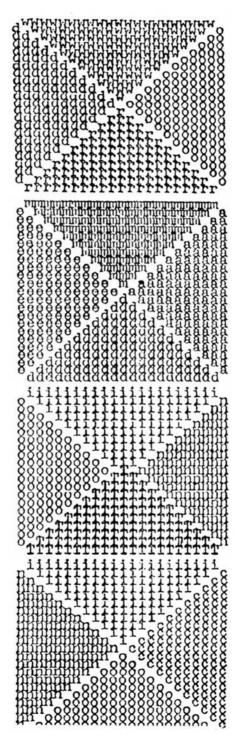
all language poetic

all lang uage is i nher entl у ро etic word and lett ers come fort h w ith the husk of matt er c ling ing to t hem like a ba be t uggi ng i ts m othe rs a pron

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Language as Labyrinth





jett ison what is u ness enti al b agga ge t hat lang uage haul s ar ound

FLYING

MACHINE

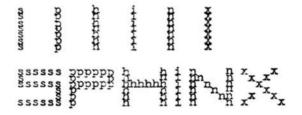
then your song will shud der and rise like wrig ht b roth ers flyi ng m achi ne a t ki tty hawk

SPHINX SPHTXX SPHXXX SPXXXX XXXXX SoHiNx XNTHPS sPhInX XXTHPS Sphinx XXXHPS XXXXPS sphinX XXXXXX s.hinx s..inx XXXXXX s...nx sphinx sshinz sssinx SSSSNXx SSSSSX ...nx SSSSSS ...inx SSSSSX ..hinx SSSSNX .phinx sssinx sphinx sshinx sfinks sphinx finkss sppinx inkssf sappnx nkssfi Xqqqqc kssfin gggggg ssfink ppppppp sfinks sphinx kissnf sphhnx sphhhx skifns fsskin sphhhh skifsn shhhhh sfinks hhhhhh sphinx sphinx phinx sphiix sphiii hinx inx spiiii siiiii nx iiiiii sphinx sphinx sspphh iinnxx s hinx sp inx SSSDDD hnhiii sph nx nnnxxx sphi x sphin sssspp pphhhh sphi x sph nx iiiinn sp inx nnxxxx s hinx sphinx phinx sssssp pppphh sphinx hhhiii iinnnn nxxxxx

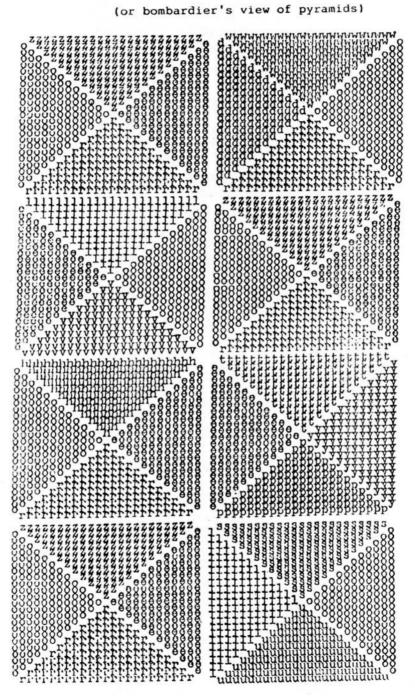
sphinx

sphinx

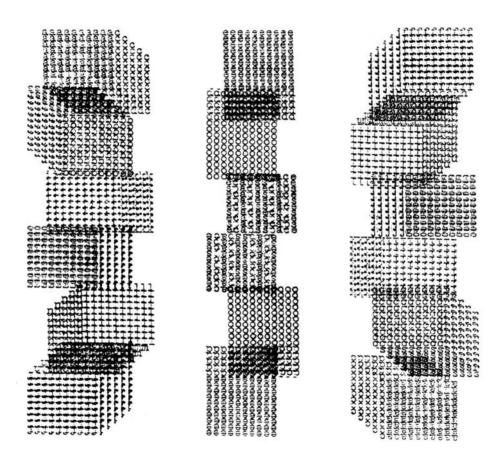
sphinxsphinxsphinxsph sphinxsphinxsphinxsp sphinxsphinxsphinxsph sphinxsphinxsphinxsp



zero poem (or bombardier's view of pyramids)



Stacked Poem

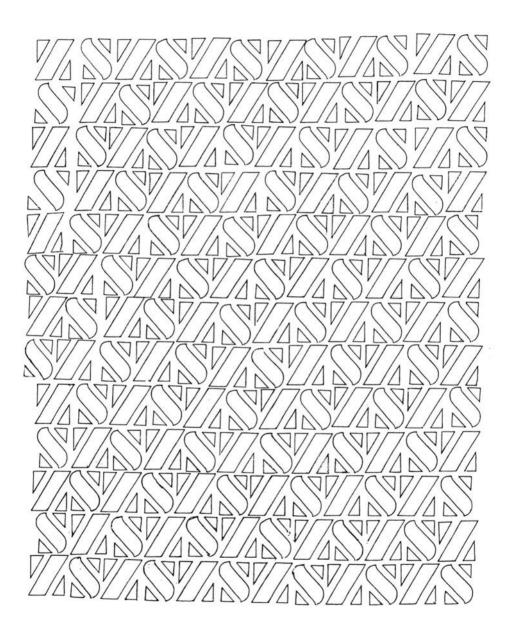


POESIS

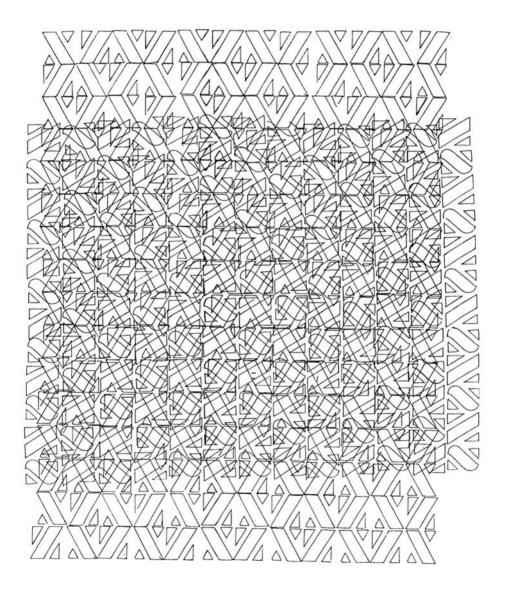
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Variation on Z & S 1



Variation on X & Z



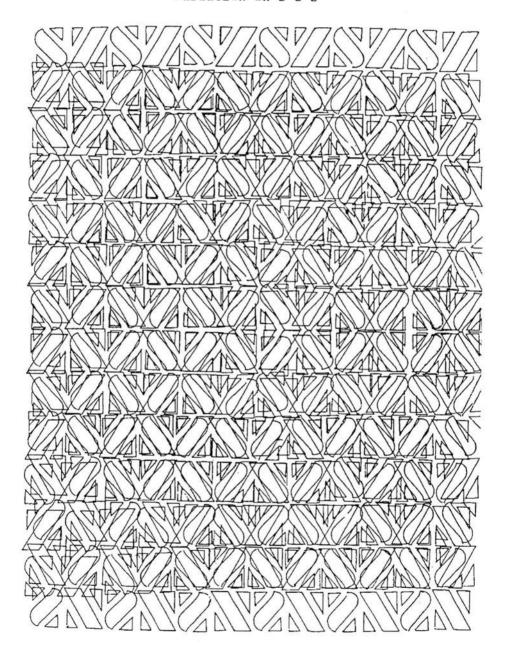
BLUES

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pick	trel	dumb	wise
your	hang	when	guru
kora	your	love	word
tika	drum	done	pope
ting	doom	gone	spew
tika	doom	bard	barb
ting	doom	fire	wire
ting	love	your	from
love	done	muse	your
done	gone	lite	lyre
gone	magi	mine	when
poet	cast	fuse	glum
play	your	fuel	barb
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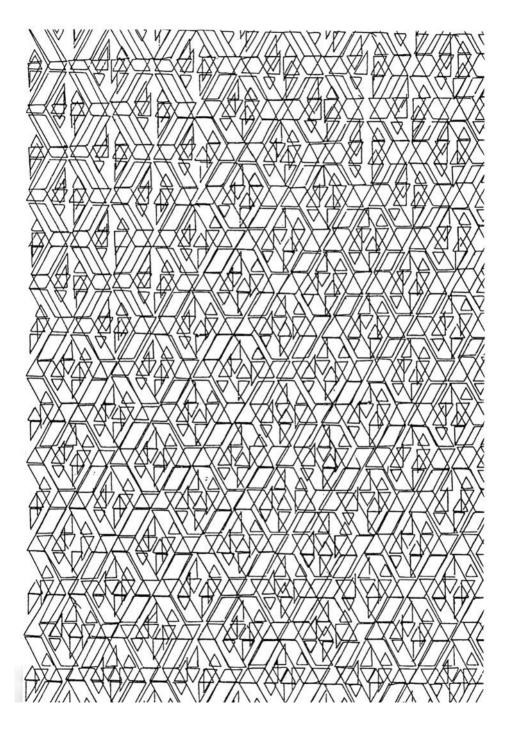
high/low art

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MAZE V Variation on S & Z



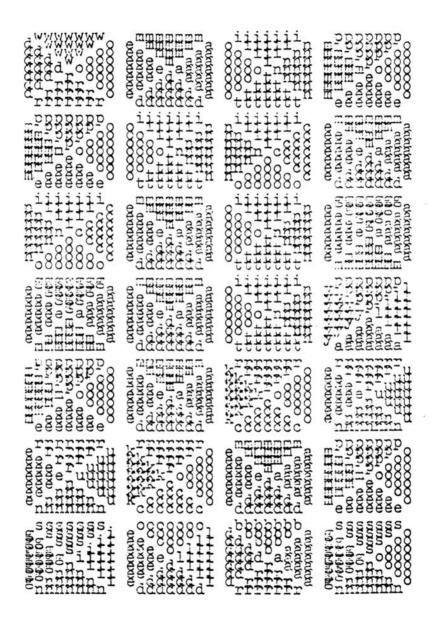
Variation on X & Z 2



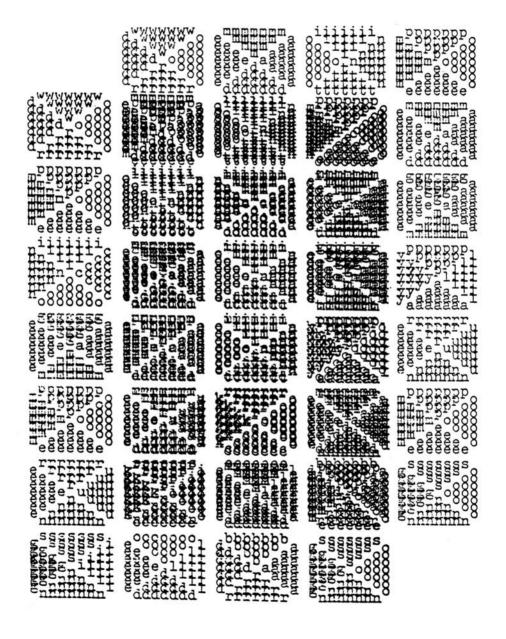
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Word Made Into Icon 2



Word Made Into Icon 3

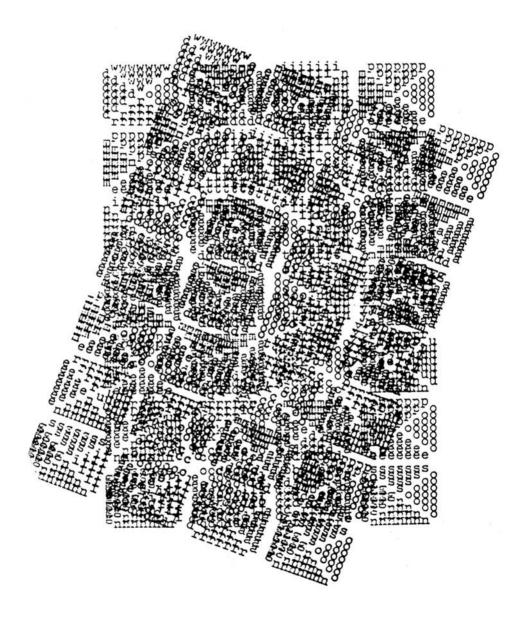


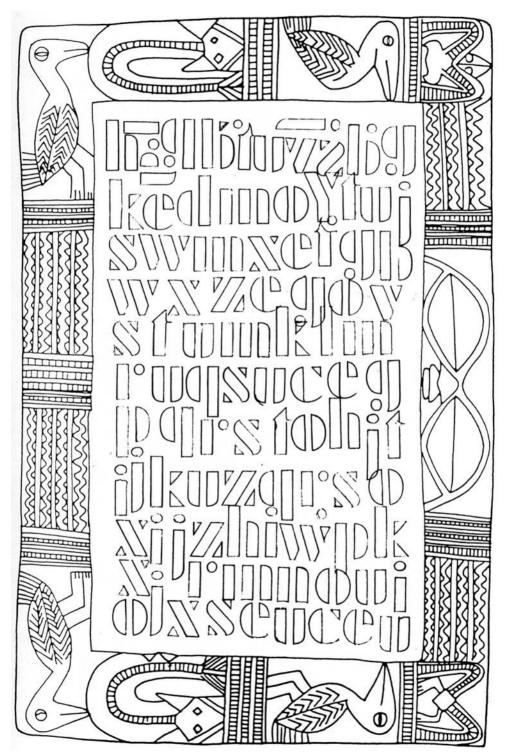
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Word Made Into Icon 4





OLDE MYTH

(for bryan mchugh)

olde myth make rare poem hmmm mmmm	olde tune make body move hmmm mmmm	olde song make foot drum hmmm mmmm	olde jazz make head sway hmmm mmmm	olde raga make eyes gaze hmmm mmmm	olde aire make soul
				mmmm	soul soar hmmm mmmm

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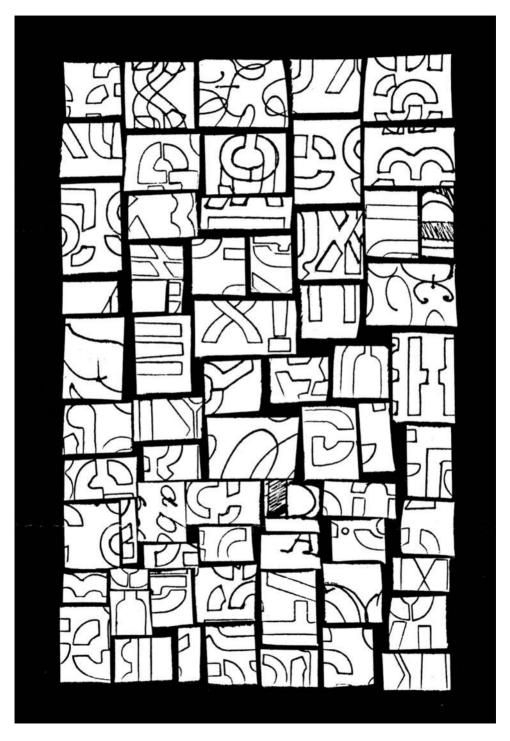
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Alphalith 1



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> HEARTH Homage to Pierre Garnier the Oba of Spatialisme

POET ICAL VALI DITY

what folk need more than this game of true or fals e is pure form form form ques ts n ot q uest ions & an swer s o bscu rity does have some poet ical vali dity

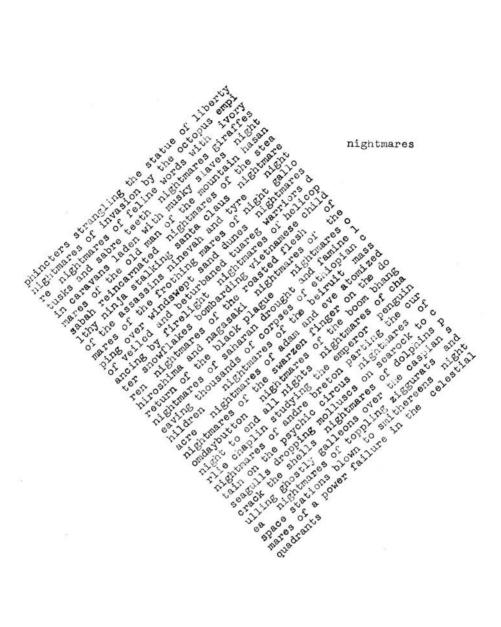


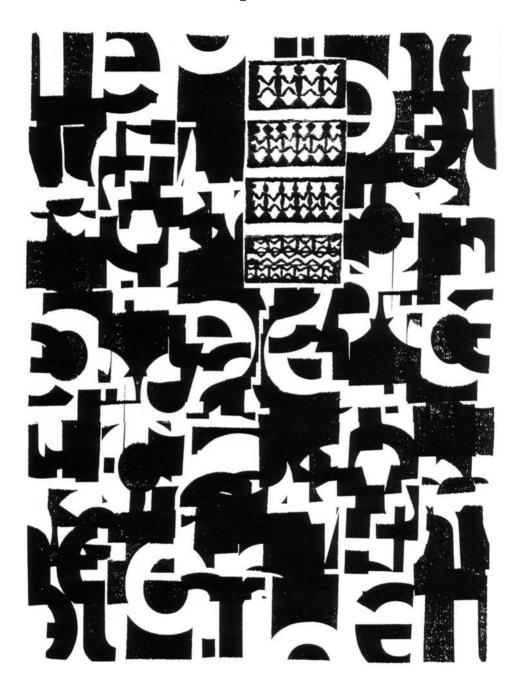
Minotaur



Terror and rain stand in the sky So thick, you could not tell them fro That blackness out of which you come.
---Edna St. Vincent Millay the pool of the property of th structure design selec at random

"For I am Nightmare: where I fly,





Fragments 2



african design

tiger zebra tiger zebra

ancestral dancers

ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fant ti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fan nti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fa anti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu u fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zu lu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zu lu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zu lu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zu lu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zu lu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zu lu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zu lu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zu lu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zu u fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zul fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu anti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu f nti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fa ti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fan i ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fant ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fant il ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fannti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu u fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu u fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi sahanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu natusi ashantu natusi hausa wolof zu u fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zul fanti ashanti fulanli yoruba bantu pygmy watusi hausa wolof zulu

Homage to Inca Artists

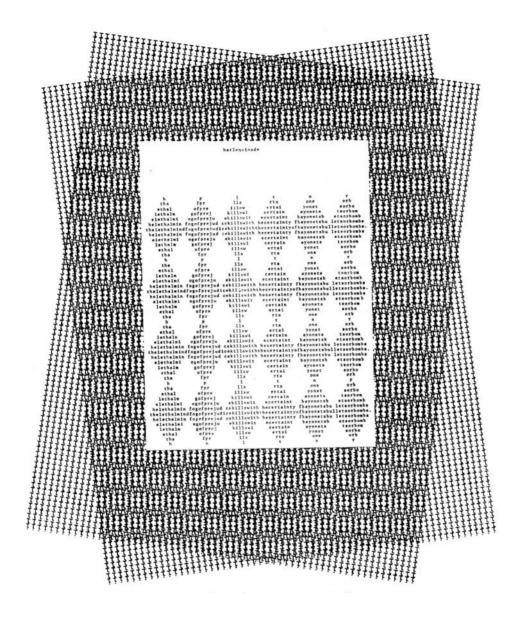




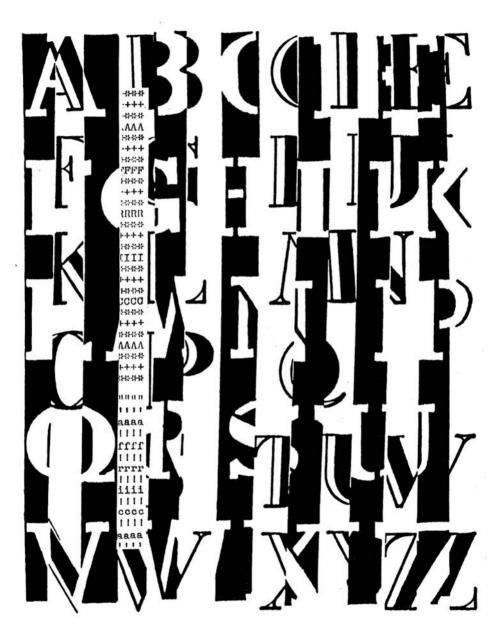
song for 10 voices & kora

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Variation on Harlequinade







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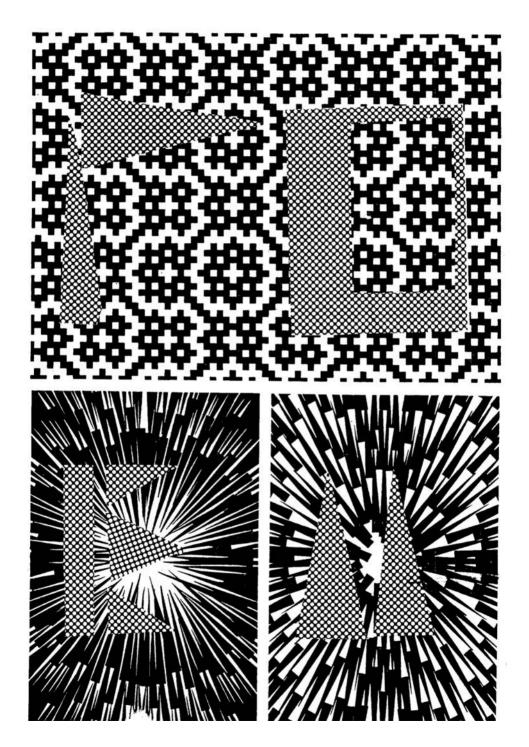
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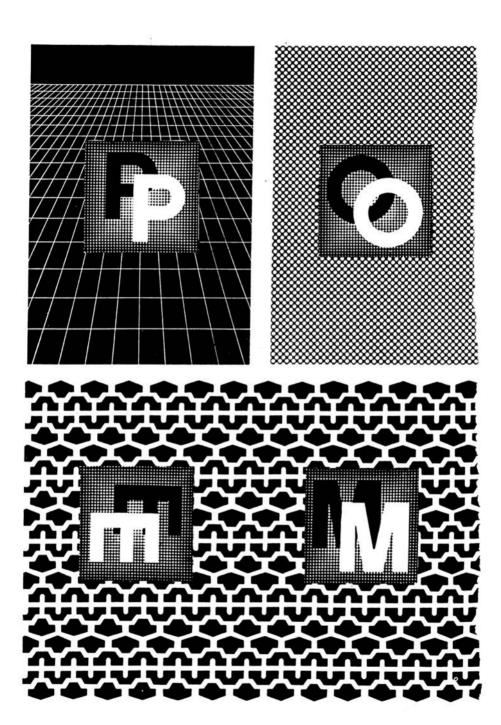
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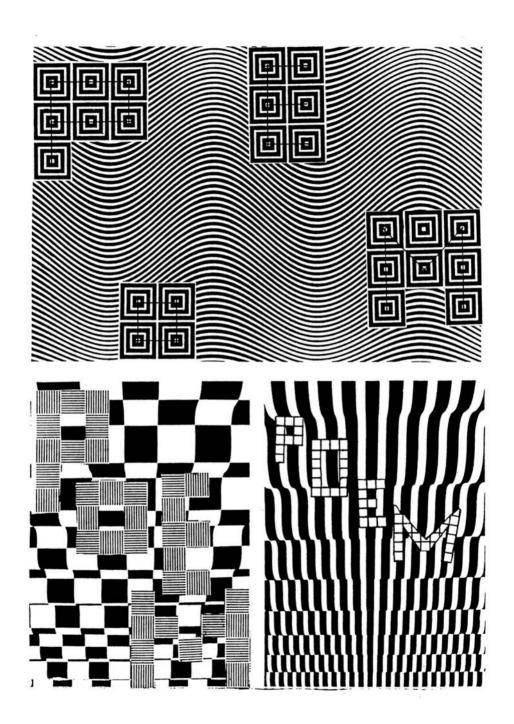


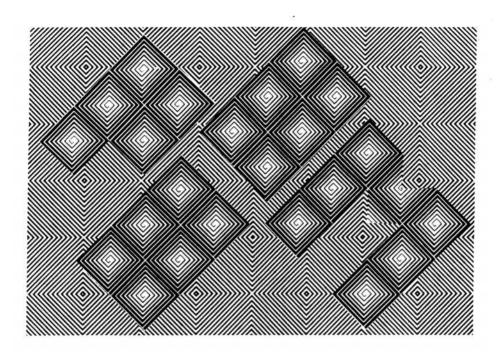


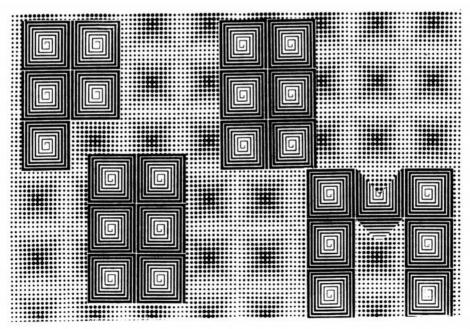
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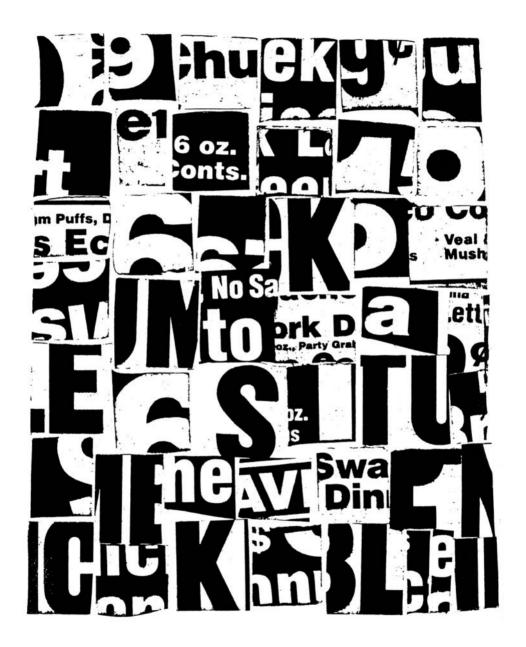


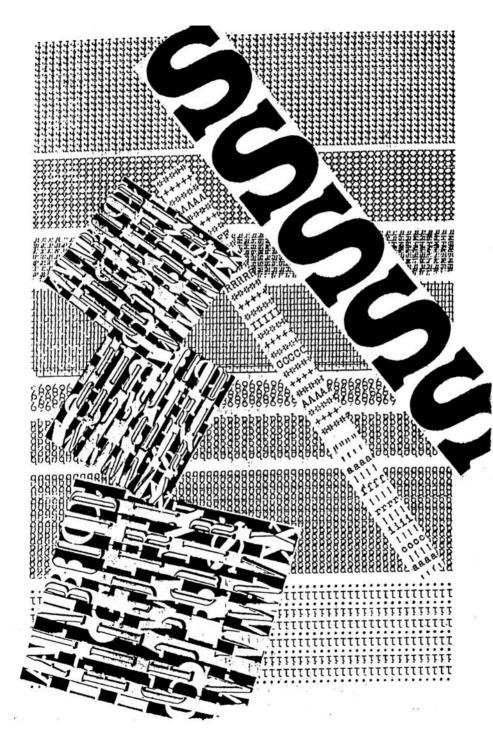
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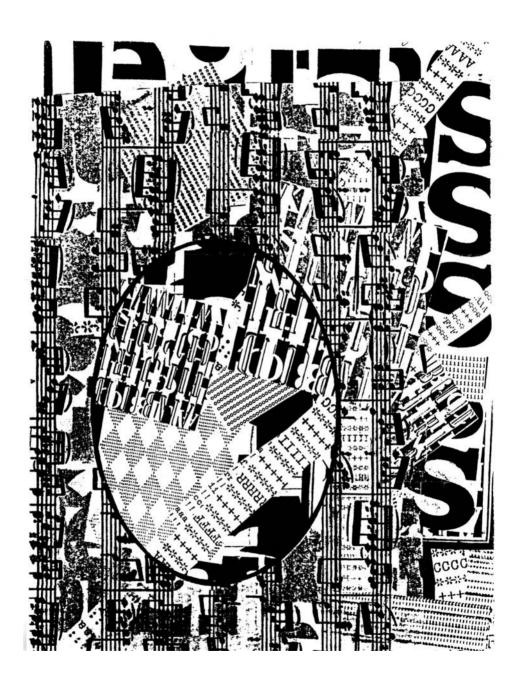
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SONATA





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Language Gears I



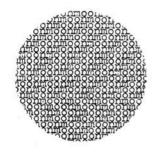
Language Gears II



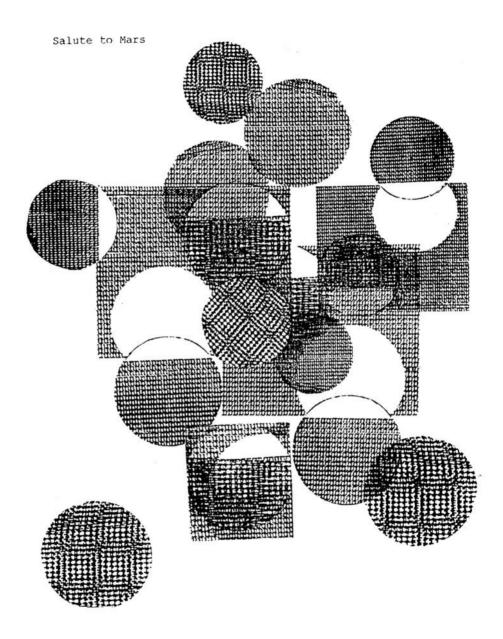
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MEDITATIONS ON RHYTHM

rhythm of the sun so impressed the ancient egyptian pharoah ahkenaton that he decreed the sun the one God ahkenaton observed that the sun invariably & rhythmically rose daily charioted slowly & majestically across the azure heavens & set blanketing all in dimlit darkness yet each morning it returned to spread its warm embrace on all living things kissing flowers & grain into fruition in praise ahkenaten the rebel president wrote poems thereby becoming the first poet in recorded history

MEDITATE ON RHYTHM

rhythm of the nile caressed and overflowed the african valley pulling forth vegetation that sprouted & reached its delicate tendrils from mother earth to father sun into every dismal & dark corner light seeped illuminating the gloomy night with its sweltering brilliance shimmering relections of this radiant rhythm danced like swirling dervishes on the ripling nile tide was it rhythm that built the magically magnificent pyramids we all know the wonder of rhythmic & communal & creative work that can do miraculous things

MEDITATE ON RHYTHM

even today african descendants sing & chant & dance when they work rhythm is in us like our hearbeat breathing & atoms rhythm is the dance of the cosmos is the visible reminder of our invisible soul if you do not believe this witness gospel blues or south african dancer/singers who can surpass their innate rhythm call & response songs folk ballads work songs chants hollers sea chanteys hollers spirituals & blues all grew out of this innate rhythm

MEDITATE ON RHYTHM

even today here in the medinas of the u s a when a beautiful & proud sister sashays down the avenue the young hiphop brothers who are experts on this subject nod knowingly to one another & declare SHE GOT IT GOING ON meaning she's got rhythm the rise & fall of ancient civilizations like egypt kush punt timbuktu meroe & babylon follow a rhythm the seasons follow a rhythm our sleeping & waking keep a rhythm rivers creeks seas tributaries & ocean tides all flow to a rhythm as do all living breathing seething things

MEDITATE ON RHYTHM

Afterword

Bill Keith's visual poetry has ranged widely over at least three decades. During that time, it has been delightful, interesting, and informative to see how he has pulled new dimensions into it, and how he has made the work of other poets and genres his own. His previous books have tended to settle on specific techniques or themes. These chart patterns of evolution and growth which distinguish him from many lesser visual poets who find a catchy formula and stick to it.

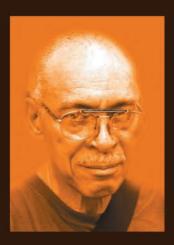
His *Pictographs* series, for instance, makes a great synthesis of genres and forms. Starting from a solid base in African iconography, Keith works through other forms, including the collective store of images from many primary cultures and from our own. Textile patterns make up part of the African base of many poems, and this can be seen in poems where Egyptian papyrus becomes something like a cloth when enlarged, and in poems where a series of exclamation points become a fabric that rhymes precisely with a zebra's markings. An abstract photocopied distortion from an unknown, and perhaps unknowable, source can in similar manner make a provocative answer to a collage strongly influenced by Lettrisme.

Given the nature of his earliest work, closely associated with simple concrete, moving quickly enough into a take on Op-Art which made the pieces opulent as well as optical, his moves into new areas make new books surprises which readers may look forward to. The present selection seems particularly interesting in his continued evolution of takes on other artists and genres, his usual inventiveness, and, particularly, his further development of poems that explore strategies for page-kinetics. This dimension of the work in the present book takes ideas from the Op-Art pieces and moves them into an exploration of movement in rectilinear forms. It seems likely that this comes about in part as collaboration with his editor, Igor Satanovsky. The poems move through permutations over page sequence which very from continuous to episodic. One line of development features thin columns of letters tipped at various angles to create dynamic imbalances and eccentric rhythms. Another set of episodes work out from bases in the modular poems such as those found in classic Concrete initially forming geometric patterns, but moving into something else by superimposition and the absorption of curved letters and pseudo-letters. Yet another series takes its base in internally radiant square forms deployed in grids. The first seem homages to Karl Kempton, who used this strategy

extensively. These become most interesting in later variations where Keith superimposes radiant grids, creating something like moire patterns that give the images a vibrant quality. Others based in Lettriste models (or in Latin American poems influenced by Lettrisme) interact with varieties of repetitive stamps and seals. Beginning early enough in the book, running as cousins of the linear columns. Keith begins a series of serpentine poems based on African images and African themes. These inform and reshape the other poems in the book. The fluidity of these poems suggests an African alternative to North Atlantic linearity. Keith closes the book with a set of verbal meditations on rhythm, giving a retrospective key to the book as a whole. [One of my own concerns has been with the strategies for exploring rhythm in visual poetry, as often as not through means of varying the possibilities of reading speeds, and displaying text and words in nonstandard orders.] Each poem has its own space, its own dance, its own games, its own conceits and resonances. The book as a complete entity, however, weaves the rhythms of cultures into a fluid yet stately dance, inviting people with different backgrounds and orientations to share their abilities and achievements, and to see where they can take them from that meeting point.

- Karl Young

Bill Keith was born in New Rochelle, New York in 1929. He is a painter, collagist, poet and photographer who studied with Charles Alston and Roy De Carava. He founded the Malcolm X Art Center, directing it until 1975. His books include *Wingdom* (Runaway Spoon), *Spatialisme* (Writers Forum), *Op Poems* (Writers Forum), *Sphinx* (Xexoxial Endarchy) and *L'affaire du Labyrinthe* (with Arrigo Lora-Totino, Left Hand Books, 2001). In 1991 he curated with Karl Kempton *Visualog IV*, an international exhibition of visual poetry. Most recently, his work has been included in *Writing To Be Seen*, an anthology of visual poetry (Light and Dust, 2002), and *spidertangle the book, a coincidental miscellany of now vispo* (Xexoxial Editions, 2002).



"Barely visible though Bill Keith's poetry has been so far, mark my prediction that it will be reprinted for as long as anthologies of experimental and/or African-American writings are made."

Richard Kostelanetz

"One of the great visual poets of our time, Bill Keith's work is both uniquely American and excitingly universal. He uses words and letters as totemic objects, and, conversely, design and visual elements as text, to expand the possibilities of language and mind. His work makes it clear that language is a tactile and material medium that communicates and has meaning through and in all the senses of our bodies. Keith's language is a true world language, and it has found a vital place in the international avant garde: it can be read and understood by anyone anywhere, regardless of one's "native tongue". It is truly wonderful to have this long-overdue selection of his work available: read it, see it, feel it, be it!"

Dr. John M. Bennett

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