Pictographs

Bill Keith
Pictographs

Bill Keith
ill Keith. All rights reserved.

thank the John W. and Clara C. Higgins Foun-
Oliveros Foundation for financial assistance

Hugh.
by Bryan McHugh.

United States of America.

For
Antar & Tarik Keith
I would like to believe that quotations in this work act less as escutcheon than mosaic of a collective dream.

Ihab Hassan, *The Right Promethean Fire*
As a painter, photographer and writer I am
produce what is termed
language art. This
language-barriers and emphasizes the
symbolical function of language.

Myth is an enduring link between the pas
As a painter, photographer and writer I am uniquely qualified to produce what is termed visual poetry and/or language art. This art sublimely ignores language-barriers and emphasizes the symbolical function of language.

Myth is an enduring link between the past and the present.
How, at my age, to participate in creative endeavors—but avoid
the inherent stress attendant upon such activities. Art should be
a release of tensions—not a compounding of them into complexes.

All of us have ideas. Some are masters of their ideas; others
are slaves of their ideas. I prefer to be the master; not the
slave.

I chose to be an artist-poet for a selfish reason. I wanted to
be free to create. Unfortunately, somewhere along this odyssey, I got mischarted... now I am a disgruntled slave to my art.
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), and Sphinx (Xenoxial Endarchy). In 1991 he curated with Karl Kempton Visualog IV, an international exhibition of visual poetry.
*Pictographs* mixes different types of picture-writing with fragments of prose-writings in a formal arrangement linked to West African visual traditions. Keith's constructions employ designs intended to be scanned metrically, a visual counterpart to the off-beat phrasing of melodic accents in African and Afro-American music. Keith's "writing" seems to be suspended between two othernesses: painting and music. The staggered siting of glyphs and signs marks the subtle crossover from picture language to picture theory. Text runs in strips against a black background, not so much as arguments to follow as seams joining master and slave narratives. In Keith's discourse on his situation as a poet in a late capitalist society, a picture emerges of an artist who in mastering his art becomes a slave to it. His condition mirrors one analyzed by Sartre in *Notebook for an Ethics*: "Naturally, there most often follows some form of alienation, that is, that the goal, as soon as it is collective, becomes what is essential and the person becomes what is inessential. Their true relationship is not disentangled until one has put an end to the spirit of seriousness and seen that the person is his goal in the form of an ec-stasis and a gift."